

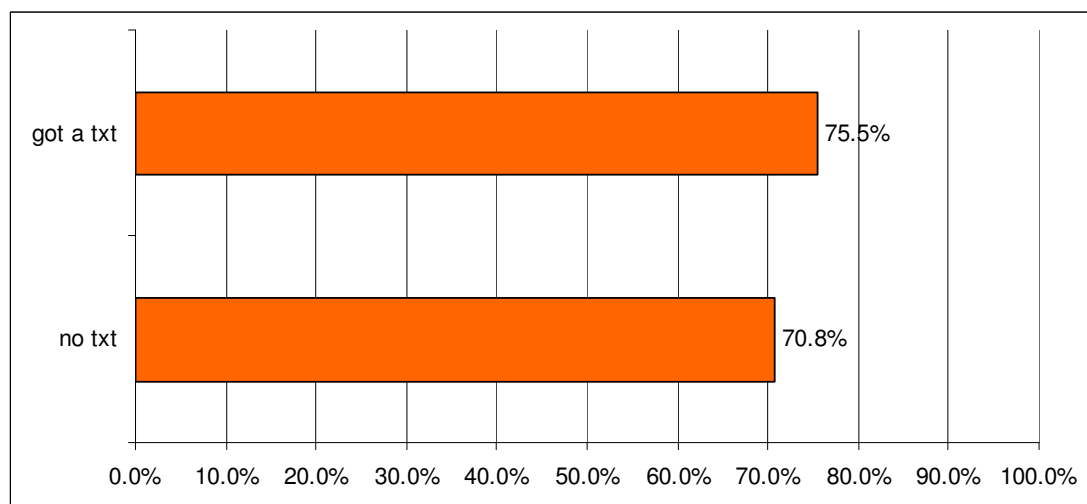
# Did a txt reminder on election day increase voter turnout?



Dr Helena Catt and Peter Northcote, New Zealand Electoral Commission, May 2009.  
The Electoral Commission thanks Vodafone New Zealand for its support of this research.

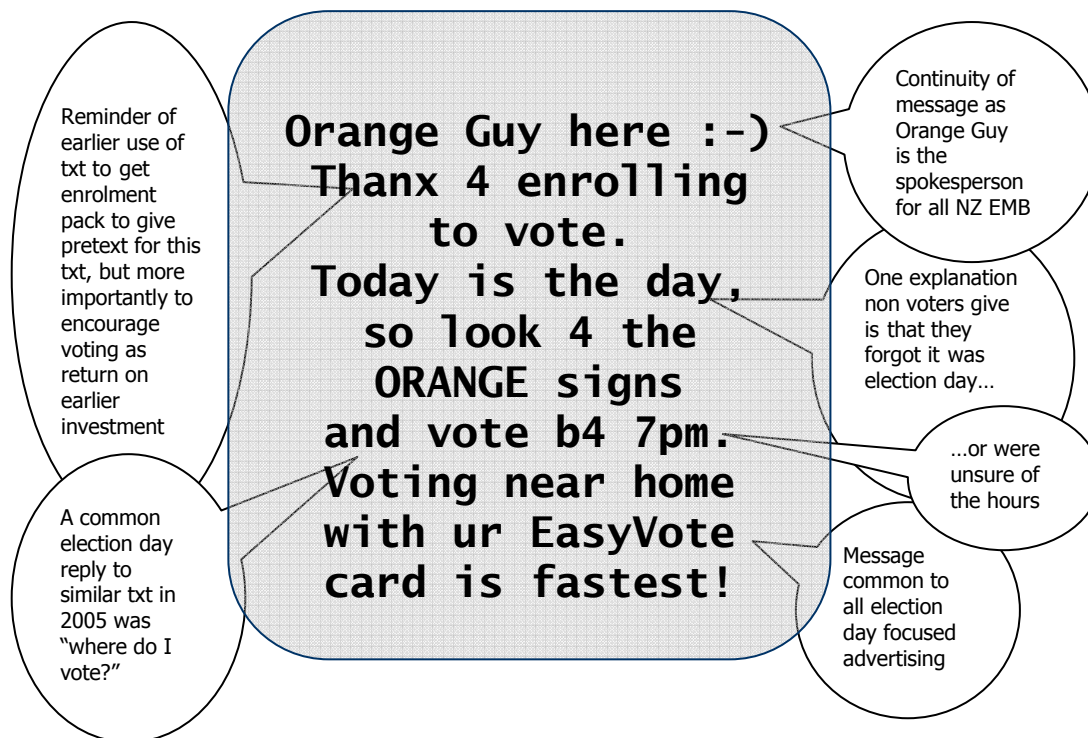
In a controlled experiment on New Zealand's parliamentary election day in 2008 those who received a txt (SMS) message from the "orange elections guy" (pictured) reminding them to vote had a 4.7% point higher turnout than those who did not receive the txt message. This level of impact is large for a direct marketing initiative of its type and for a turnout differential between matched cohorts and indicates an effective and cost efficient way of prompting people to vote. Assuming the txt recipients were younger and more likely to be first time voters due to the general profile of txt users, large-scale adoption of this intervention could be particularly effective at motivating a priority audience for the Electoral Commission (and election management bodies (EMBs) internationally).

**Graph 1 - Percentage who cast a vote**



## The txt message

Between 10am and midday on election day, 8 November 2008, 15,662 people who had txted in to request an enrolment pack since May 2008 received the following txt:



(References for the research referred to are in the Appendix)

For most txt recipients in our sample there was a gap of over three months between their two txt communications relating to elections: requesting an enrolment pack and receiving the election day message. However the wider advertising context provided a continuity of message. The orange guy featured in all of the advertising encouraging people to enrol which ran from May until the election on TV, radio, in newspapers, on the internet and on buses. Advertising messages about the voting process and MMP also feature the orange guy and ran from three weeks before election day. The orange guy is widely recognised as the spokesperson for elections and people seem to be willing to chat to him in a relaxed way. For instance, orange guy received 173 replies to his message. Of these: 60% were positive in tone (including 30 who said they had already voted); 21% were negative (mainly about the value of voting or the calibre of choices, although a few abused orange guy); and 19% were neutral (split fairly evening between general questions, "who's this?", and other). Messages received included:

KIA KOTO (Hi) FANX VERY MUCH IVE BEEN WAITING 4 UR REPLY AL WEEK IM ALREADY IN LINE AND IM READY TO VOTE THANK-U AGAIN KAI KETE (See you later) <KISS MEH:)MWAHH> (This may be a reply to a similar reminder txt sent to a small number of subscribers for this service offered in limited advertising.)

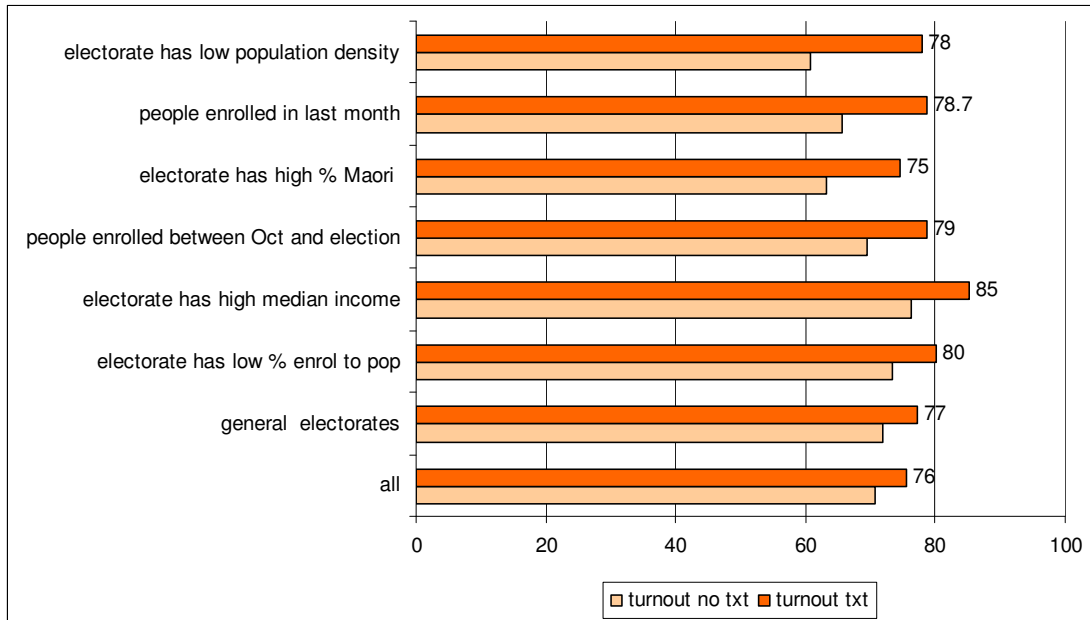
ME JST VOTED 2DAY,CRNT COMPLAIN IF U DIDNT PT UR SAY IN

YEA VOTE VOTED THAX 4 MAKING IT EASY AS

HEY ORANGE GUY WE HAVIN FLAT WARMING 2NYTE BRING THE ORANGE JUICE AND ALL YR FRIENDS.

All replies were themselves auto-replied to with a txt thanking for the message and asking senders to call the freephone number if they needed election day help.

**Graph 2 - Percentage who cast a vote – within sub-categories where there is a statistically significant result at 95% (shown in descending order of impact)**



Note: "electorate" in the above graph refers to general electorates only.

There was no statistically significant impact in the following sub-categories: Māori electorates, electorates with a high percentage of: Pacific people, Asian peoples, people aged 15 to 24, people who had been at the current address for 2 years or less, electorates with high turnout, electorates with low turnout, electorates with low medium income, electorates with high medium income, electorates with high population density.

In the following sub-categories the impact was significant at 90%: electorates with a high percentage of new migrants, and amongst people who sent a txt requesting an enrolment pack more than 3 months prior to the election.

Population density is measured using electoral population and land area which includes inland water. The quarter of general electorates with the lowest population density were considered. The difference in turnout between those who received a txt and those who did not is 17.2 percentage points. A number of factors may have had an impact here. In areas of low population density people may see fewer election related outdoor advertising meaning that the txt message fills a void taken up with other advertising messages in more densely populated areas; it may also be that this lack of clutter intensifies the relationship with orange guy who will have been seen and heard on radio and tv.

Amongst those who enrolled in the four weeks before election day and therefore had to cast a special declaration vote turnout was 13.1 percentage points higher amongst those who received the txt. There are three aspects that may be at work here. One is the necessity of filling in extra forms when casting the vote, one is the information that has been sent to the person, and the other is the proximity of the action of enrolling to Election Day. Comparing just those who did not get a txt indicates that those who have enrolled by 8th October are more likely to vote than those who enrol later (73.2% compared to 65.6%, a difference of 7.6 percentage points, but only statistically significant such that we would be confident of a repeat 90 out of 100 times). For those people who enrolled between October and the election, turnout was 9.1 percentage points higher amongst those who received the txt. The election was announced on 12 September so these are all people who have taken the step to

enrol after the media coverage of the election announcement. The txt may have helped affirm people who may have felt "naughty" by enrolling late, while also maintaining the momentum of late enrollers to complete the process by voting.

In the quarter of general electorates with the highest Māori population in the 2006 census turnout amongst those receiving the txt message was 11.2 percentage points higher. In contrast there was no impact in the Māori electorates. Just over half of enrolled Māori are on the Māori roll. Turnout in Māori electorates is consistently lower than in general elections and research suggests that turnout amongst Māori in general electorates is also lower (see Māori participation research noted in appendix).

In the quarter of general electorates with the highest median income turnout amongst those who received the txt was 9.1 percentage points higher.

Electoral population includes all who live in the area, not just those who can vote. In those general electorates where the number who are enrolled is low as a percentage of the electoral population (which might indicate a younger electorate), turnout amongst those who received a txt was 6.8 percentage points higher.

In the general electorates turnout amongst those receiving a txt was 5.1 percentage points higher. As noted earlier, there was no impact in the Māori electorates which suffer the lowest turnout of all electorates. The reasons behind low turnout in Māori electorates appear complex but are not well understood (see Māori participation research noted in appendix).

A txt reminder to vote on election day clearly had a positive impact for a broad range of recipients. The creative approach using orange guy, already familiar to many as an elections spokesperson and the message content devised from research learnings seem to have both been critical to its effectiveness.

## **Appendix**

### **Methodology**

We intentionally did not send an Election Day reminder to everyone who had send a txt to 3676 so that we could test the impact of the txt on voting. By comparing turnout amongst those who were sent the txt with turnout amongst those who did not we can detect any impact that the txt had.

After the election we randomly selected 1,600 people who had received the txt and 1600 who had not received the txt. All of these people had sent a txt asking for an enrolment pack in the months of May to September. We then searched for these people on the electoral roll until we had 800 enrolled people who had received a txt and 800 enrolled people who had not received a txt. For each of these 1,600 enrolled people we found them on the master roll which records whether or not someone was given a ballot paper at the election. Therefore we know the turnout rate amongst those who received a txt and amongst those who did not receive a txt. We also know which electorate everyone was in.

Statistical significance means that if the process was to be repeated we would be confident that 95 out of 100 times the result would be similar. (If a result is not statistically significant then we cannot with any certainty predict that we would get the same result if we repeated the actions.)

### **Orange elections guy**

Orange Elections Guy – is the single approachable and versatile spokesperson for New Zealand’s electoral agencies. 2008 was his third election. “It’s easy!” is the single-minded proposition underpinning all communications regardless of whether the advertising purpose is enrolment, understanding MMP, or voting processes. He features on television, radio, online, newspapers, and in a range of different outdoor advertising formats. Orange Elections Guy’s work for the Electoral Commission in 2008 is reported here [www.elections.org.nz/administration/ec-corp-info/public-information-and-education-campaign-election-08.html](http://www.elections.org.nz/administration/ec-corp-info/public-information-and-education-campaign-election-08.html)

### **Key dates**

5 May - enrolment packs were sent to everyone on the electoral roll asking them to check their details. Enrolment advertising starts

20 June - the roll is closed for the preliminary printing and again there was associated advertising.

12 September - the date of the election was announced

8 October – last date for enrolment to be in the printed roll. Enrolment after this date necessitates casting a special declaration vote

19 October - major advertising about election process and MMP starts

8 November - election day

### Table of all that are significant at 95% in a chi square test

	turnout no txt	turnout txt	difference in turnout	sample size, got txt	sample size, no txt
all	70.8	75.5	4.7	770	756
general electorates	72.0	77.1	5.1	708	682
general electorate has low % enrol to pop	73.4	80.2	6.8	151	125
general electorate has high median income	76.2	85.3	9.1	177	164
people enrolled between Oct and election	69.5	78.6	9.1	206	197
general electorate has high % Māori	63.3	74.5	11.2	160	153
people enrolled in last month	65.6	78.7	9.1	141	131
general electorate has low population density	60.8	78.0	17.2	177	176

### References to other research

Electoral Commission statement of intent 2008-2013 can be read at [http://www.elections.org.nz/files/EC\\_SOI\\_2008\\_web\\_or\\_print\\_on\\_plain\\_final\\_0.pdf](http://www.elections.org.nz/files/EC_SOI_2008_web_or_print_on_plain_final_0.pdf)

Young non-voters - qualitative research summary can be read at <http://www.elections.org.nz/study/researchers/participation/youth-non-voters-qualitative-research-summary.html>

Prompting participation... voter motivation trial report can be read at <http://www.elections.org.nz/study/researchers/participation/voter-motivation-trial-report.html>

Māori electoral participation research programme and reports 2004-06 can be read at <http://www.elections.org.nz/study/researchers/participation/Māori-participation-conf.html>

Now or never - electoral participation literature review can be read at <http://www.elections.org.nz/study/researchers/litrevs-biblios/now-or-never-lit-review.html>