

VOTER PARTICIPATION STRATEGY

Why this, and why now?

The Commission's vision is for New Zealanders to trust, value and *take part* in parliamentary elections. New Zealand, however, is some distance from realising this vision with respect to voter participation.

The last three decades have seen voter turnout fall dramatically in New Zealand - from a comparatively respectable 89% in 1981 to 69% in 2011.¹ This is not a problem unique to New Zealand. Turnout has been declining steadily in most developed democracies around the world. However, New Zealand's downward trend is particularly steep. If it continues, New Zealand might face turnout rates of around 50% within the next three decades.

The Commission is seriously concerned about the implications of declining voter participation for the future health and legitimacy of our democracy. However, for anything effective to be done, a broad strategy involving politicians, the media, academics, teachers, opinion leaders and ultimately society in general will be required. The question is whether the rest of New Zealand agrees.

The starting point, therefore, needs to be a national discussion about the implications of declining voter participation. It is the Commission's intention to promote such a discussion in 2014.

The Commission's Strategy

This document sets out the Commission's strategy for promoting participation through to the 2014 election.

It focuses on three key streams of work:

- starting a national discussion on the implications of declining voter participation
- providing public information and education resources that facilitate participation
- research on what affects participation

This strategy is limited to the period up until the completion of the 2014 general election. An outcome of the national discussion proposed for 2014 may be a call for the Commission to have a role in the development of a broader long-term national strategy or strategies on voter participation after the election.

This strategy also provides for the Commission to undertake a limited number of new initiatives for the 2014 election aimed at facilitating participation and to continue and expand some successful initiatives from previous elections. The primary focus will be young and new New Zealanders.

The Commission has limited staff and resources to apply to this area. It will therefore have to prioritise carefully.

In developing this strategy the Commission has engaged with academic experts, political parties and overseas electoral agencies. It intends to engage far more widely in the execution of the strategy.

¹ percentages of the age-eligible population

The role of the Commission in promoting voter participation

The Commission's statutory objective is to administer the electoral system impartially, efficiently, effectively, and in a way that:

- facilitates participation in parliamentary democracy; and
- promotes understanding of the electoral system; and
- maintains confidence in the administration of the electoral system.

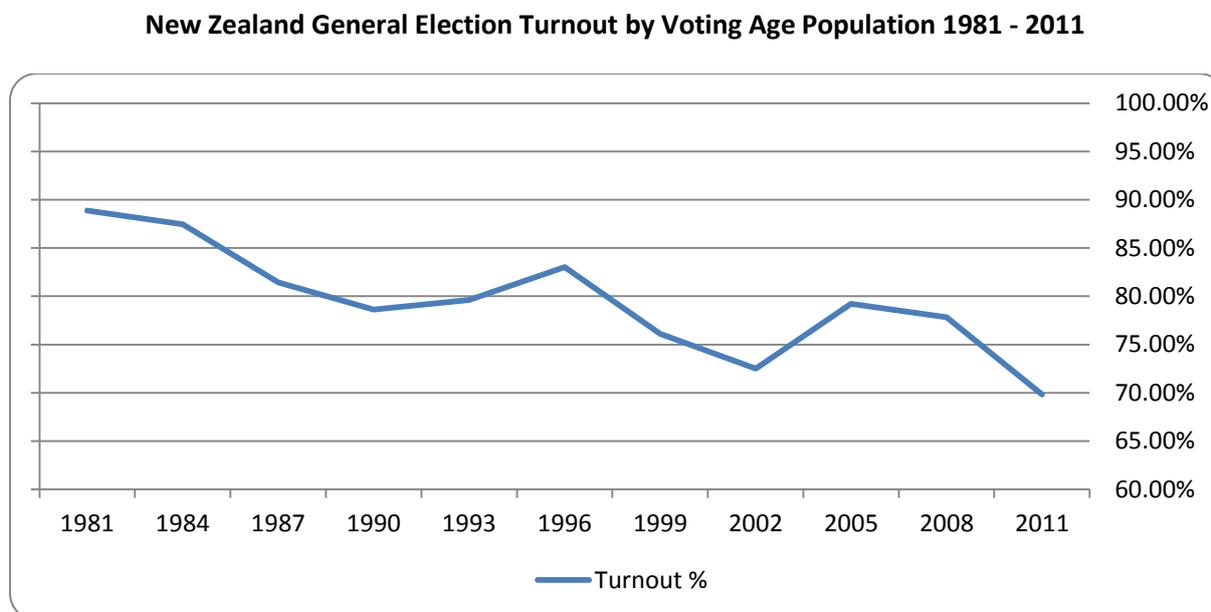
One of the Commission's priorities, therefore, is to reduce barriers to participation by developing programmes and processes that enable all New Zealanders to access our services. This includes providing information and resources to reduce the barriers for those with disabilities, literacy or language challenges, as well as for future voters through our education projects.

The Commission seeks to make it as easy as possible for people to enrol and vote, and the evidence shows that the enrolment and voting processes are not barriers to participation in New Zealand.

Most of the factors that influence turnout are outside the Commission's control, and include the perceived closeness of elections, how information about politics is disseminated, the priority given to civics education, the effectiveness of political parties' voter mobilisation, and public attitudes to politics and politicians.

Nevertheless, the Commission believes it has a role to play in championing voter participation and encouraging and supporting others to promote it.

Do we have a problem?



New Zealand used to be a world leader in electoral participation, but this is no longer the case. Turnout percentages have been declining steeply since the 1980s and at best we are now only slightly above the international average.

The decline in turnout is generational, with each new generation less likely to vote than the last. The causes of this are complex. They appear to include changing values and attitudes since the 1940s towards authority, civic duty, and politics, as well as changes in technology and the way in which people obtain information. Non-voters say they are too busy, have no interest in politics, have little faith in politicians, cannot make up their mind, or do not think their vote will make a difference. The enrolment and voting processes themselves, however, are not significant factors – it is easy to enrol and vote in New Zealand.

Stream 1: A national discussion on the implications of declining voter participation

The question for New Zealanders is whether any of this matters. Are we concerned, relaxed or resigned about declining voter participation? What value do we place on being residents of a *representative* and *participatory* democracy? How important is turnout to its health and legitimacy? If the consensus is that it does matter, then what (if anything) can be done to stem or reverse the decline? And what priority and resources are we prepared to apply to the task?

The downward trend is long and strong and it will not be quickly or easily reversed. It has taken thirty years to get to this point. Therefore, if turnouts of 60% or even 50% in the next twenty to thirty years are not the future we want for our democracy we will need to start doing something about it soon.

The Commission intends to promote a national discussion in 2014 about these matters and will report to Parliament on its outcome and the prospects for the development of a broad long-term voter participation strategy after the 2014 general election.

To promote this discussion the Commission will:

- Convene, in partnership with *the Victoria University School of Government and the Institute for Governance and Policy Studies*, a conference in early 2014 on voter participation
- Seek to engage with political parties, the media, academics, teachers, and opinion leaders on the question of voter participation and encourage them to contribute to the discussion
- Provide opportunities for New Zealanders to share their views about voter participation with the Commission, particularly through our website and social media

Stream 2: Public information and education resources that facilitate participation

The majority of New Zealanders keep their enrolment up to date and take part in electoral events. Mainstream education and public information campaigns are a way of reaching and reminding them about their rights and responsibilities.

The Commission will continue to deliver, and expand where possible, initiatives and programmes developed over previous elections. These include:

- Curriculum-linked education resources and an authentic electoral event for schools
- Outreach strategies to engage hard to reach groups
- Specialist resources in Plain English, New Zealand Sign Language and accessible formats
- Facilitated programmes for those with learning disabilities

New initiatives for 2014 include:

- New education resources for Level 3 and Level 4 of the New Zealand Curriculum
- New resources for the Te Marautanga O Aotearoa Māori-medium school curriculum
- Online and mobile approaches to facilitate participation amongst young voters
- Tools and resources to enable communities to lead their own electoral education programmes
- Building capacity in community engagement and outreach
- Contribute to the Australasian electoral agencies' project Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Information and Education Strategies

Stream 3: Research on what affects voter participation

There will be an on-going need for good information about what affects voter participation in New Zealand and, in particular, what strategies, mechanisms or programmes might be effective in maintaining or increasing engagement and turnout.

The Commission will seek to work with academics and other researchers with an expertise in voter participation to –

1. Share information
2. Ascertain what research is being done
3. Identify what gaps in information there may be and try to find ways to fill them

The ultimate objective would be to establish a research programme within New Zealand that provides the information we need to understand what is happening with voter participation, how we might best achieve higher rates of voter participation, and to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of what we do.

What next?

The Commission will seek to engage with politicians, public servants, academics, teachers, media, opinion leaders, local bodies, community groups and anyone who is interested over the second half of 2013 with a view to laying the groundwork for a useful discussion about voter participation in 2014.