

Objective/brief

Over the last three decades, voter turnout in New Zealand has fallen dramatically, dropping to 69% in 2011 from 89% in 1981. While this is a global issue, the trend downwards is particularly steep in New Zealand. If it continues, the country faces turnout rates of around 50% in the next three decades – a prospect the New Zealand Electoral Commission, an independent Crown entity responsible for the administration of parliamentary elections, has labelled “deeply concerning” (see [Appendix A](#)).

The decline in turnout is believed to be generational, with each new generation less likely to vote than the last. The Commission has therefore set the following ambitious goals:

- > 80% of those eligible to enrol vote in the 2020 election; and
- > 85% of 18–24 year olds are enrolled by 2020.

Over the past decades, the Commission’s focus has been on making it easy to enrol and vote, rather than addressing the question of why one should vote. However, research following the 2011 election (immediately preceding the 2014 election) found the enrolment and voting processes themselves are not significant factors influencing low turnout. As a result, the Commission launched a plan for a motivational integrated communications/PR campaign, to begin in the lead-up to the 20 September 2014 election.

Based around the theme “your vote is a powerful thing”, the campaign targeted young and/or less engaged audiences and communities, and was to be the first in a series of efforts leading up to 2020.

Following our work on the 2011 New Zealand election, Isentia was engaged by the Commission for the 2014 election to:

1. Demonstrate the effectiveness of this campaign, in terms of proactive engagement, message pickup and the circulation of campaign collateral.
2. Identify the best channels for future campaign efforts.
3. Identify issues impacting the Commission’s ability to engage both the media and online communities.

Strategy

In order to assess the campaign’s impact on younger demographics, and those less likely to be engaged with civic issues, Isentia analysed both social media and editorial media coverage. As the study was to serve as a first benchmark for work towards the Commission’s 2020 goals, all relevant coverage was



NZ Electoral Commission

New Zealand 2014 General Election

Category: Best Measurement of a Public Sector Campaign

Company entering: Isentia

Contact: Kate Greenwood

Email: kate.greenwood@isentia.com

Telephone: +61 3 8327 6409

Highlights

- > The study shows significant early success for an integrated communications/PR campaign targeting an issue of national significance.
- > The research has informed a report presented to the New Zealand Parliament.
- > The analysis will underpin the Commission’s engagement strategy for the 2017 election.
- > The research findings also aid calls for increased public funding for the Commission.

analysed so that a variety of channels could be evaluated, principally for their receptiveness to proactively generated content and messages.

Isentia also requested the Commission supply its archive of media releases and records of other engagement from the analysis period. This would allow for an effective analysis of proactivity.

As the 2011 analysis only assessed press, broadcast and internet news content, data for 2014 was filtered for certain areas of reporting to allow for valid comparisons.

The length of the analysis period was also matched to Isentia's previous work on the 2011 general election, to allow for valid comparisons.

Execution/implementation

Content Selection

Editorial and social media coverage was gathered from two separate proprietary databases, using both Isentia's standard approach of collecting content through keyword matching and the selection of media reports from within a pool of wider content using set criteria. This included mentions of:

- > The Commission itself or its personnel;
- > The Commission's public information campaigns;
- > Enrolment and voting in the general election;
- > Voter, party or candidate eligibility, enrolment and the logistics and process of standing or voting in the election;



- > The Commission's statutory duties relating to the election; and
- > Any mentions of issues that fall within this regulatory remit.

This ensured that the analysed content represented a fair and accurate sample, but also excluded political commentary, opinion poll results or coverage of campaign events at a time when the volume of this type of coverage was significantly higher than normal.

Research Framework

Once the relevant traditional media reports and social media posts had been identified, a coding framework was developed to track the appearance of campaign touch points such as broadcast and internet/social publicity collateral, regulatory issues, and key stakeholder groups such as voters aged 18–24. This content was subjected to an in-depth qualitative media analysis using the CARMA methodology (see [Appendix B](#)).

The Commission's archive of media releases and other engagement was used to assess the level of Commission-generated content present in each media report or post (from the when, where and how to vote, through to more complex issues such as strategic voting under New Zealand's Mixed Member Proportional system).

Items were also linked to media activity by third-party organisations where possible, and tagged as reactive in circumstances where the Commission was forced to respond to or address comments in the media.

Tracked messages were oriented around the "your vote is a powerful thing" campaign, while the analysis also tracked the tone of commentary on electoral regulation and reputational issues related to the Commission's role in managing the election process.

Effectiveness of Assignment

Campaign Effectiveness

Isentia's analysis supported the Commission's own findings on the ease of the voting process:

- > Both editorial and social media more frequently said it was easy to vote in the general election than not (see [Appendix C, Example 1](#)).

- > While modest, nearly double the proportion of coverage communicated the message that voting is easy in 2014 compared with 2011.
- > The ease of voting was also more often mentioned by non-Commission affiliated channels and sources than in 2011. This suggested it was more widely-acknowledged in 2014 that voting is easy ([Example 2](#)).

The analysis also showed significant early success for the Commission's efforts to encourage voter participation ([Objective 1](#)):

- > The message that "your vote is a powerful thing" was the third most frequently conveyed overall during the campaign, behind messages on the ease of enrolling; coverage also accurately reflected Commission statements ([Example 3](#)).
- > Half of all mentions of this message were spontaneously conveyed by the media, third-parties or social media users (50.3%). This indicates that the message was adopted as a part of popular discourse about the election and voting in general ([Example 4](#)).

Preferred channels and proactive content types were also identified for consideration in future campaign planning ([Objective 2](#)):

- > Online media (including social) comprised 67% of the analysed coverage ([Example 5](#)).
- > Online news alone (excluding social) comprised 25% more of the analysed editorial media coverage in 2014 than in 2011 ([Example 6](#)).
- > While Facebook was identified as the preferred social media channel, the most prominent conversation type on Facebook was the sharing of mainstream online news articles ([Example 7](#)).
- > The tone of posts sharing these articles largely followed that of the original items, reinforcing the importance of engagement with both online editorial and social media channels ([Example 8](#)).

Barriers to Engagement

A further key takeaway for the Commission was the extent to which efforts to encourage voter participation were undermined by debate over election law and its interpretation and application ([Objective 3](#)).

In 2014, several high-profile New Zealanders were investigated and ultimately referred to police for breaches of a law banning election-day advertising. These

included All Blacks and other prominent sports stars, who shared who they had voted for or posted images of themselves in the voting booth to social media.

This aspect of the election campaign was exacerbated by the implementation of a more flexible approach to advance voting in 2014, which effectively widened the voting window for all New Zealanders to close to three weeks, while the law still referred to a single day.

Isentia's analysis concluded:

- > The Commission was heavily criticised for its application of the law to what many perceived to be "innocent" if ill-informed social media users.
- > Although a smaller percentage of social media posts raised this issue overall than editorial media reports (2.2%, compared with 11.9%), discussion of the breaches was significantly less favourable in social channels ([Example 9](#)).
- > To a certain extent, this perception of "big-brothering" by the Commission undermined efforts to engage young and/or less-engaged audiences and communities via online content.

Actions

- > Isentia's analysis report has been provided to the Commission's senior managers and board.
- > The report has provided core content to the overall post-election review of the public information and education campaign, presented to Parliament via the Minister of Justice.
- > The Commission plans to use the report as a key part of its 2017 engagement strategy, following a more detailed review and analysis of the report to determine its application.

Client Testimonial

"The 2014 general election report is a key piece of research which will help to direct Commission-led publicity campaigns in future years. It has supported our shift towards more participatory messaging, and enabled us to demonstrate early success in this change to senior management and other stakeholders. The report will be a key resource in communications planning as we work towards our 2020 goals for electoral participation, particularly amongst young voters and less-engaged audiences."

**Anastasia Turnbull, Manager
Communications and Education,
NZ Electoral Commission**