



UNDERSTANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCREASING VOTER PARTICIPATION IN THE AUCKLAND LOCAL ELECTIONS

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SMITH
BUSINESS CONSULTING

STRATEGY & RESEARCH

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The business issue

Auckland Council's Voter Participation Initiative is a long term strategy to increase voter participation in Auckland elections as a result of low voter turnout in recent elections. The three major objectives of the initiative are:

- Reduced barriers to voter participation
- Candidates who reflect the communities of Auckland
- Increased understanding of council and local elections

A research programme relating to these three objectives will be used to inform engagement and communications strategies to increase participation.

An initial qualitative study was conducted in August 2018 to help understand the barriers and motivations for voting, and to standing for council – amongst key target audiences.

A subsequent quantitative survey has been conducted in March 2019 to put hard metrics around the qualitative findings, fill knowledge gaps around target audiences' understanding of council and local elections, and help prioritise initiatives to drive voter participation.

This report outlines the key findings from this quantitative research study.

What we did

We conducted an online survey of those that were eligible, but did not vote, in the 2016 Auckland Local elections - from the Dynata online research panel.

Talking to a sample of n=400 non-voters – that is representative of the Auckland local election non-voter population.

Booster samples of key target audiences were then added to obtain larger sample sizes to enable more robust analysis of these specific groups:

- Youth (18-24's) – n=80
- Māori – n=90
- Pacific Islanders – n=54
- Asians – n=97

This survey was conducted across March and April 2019.

Agenda

1.

Understanding the non-voter population and their barriers to voting.

2.

Understanding opportunities for increasing voter participation.

3.

Bringing it all together.



1.

**UNDERSTANDING
THE NON-VOTER
POPULATION AND
THEIR BARRIERS
TO VOTING**

Profiling the non-voter population

	Auck popn	Non-voters
18-24	13%	15%
25-34	16%	18%
35-44	18%	20%
45-54	19%	24%
55-64	15%	14%
65+	19%	9%
Male	48%	43%
Female	52%	57%

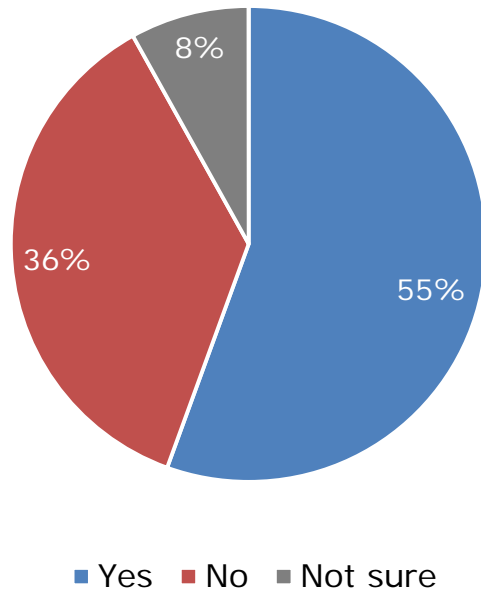
	Auck popn	Non-voters
North	24%	26%
West	11%	13%
Central	27%	22%
South	24%	24%
East	14%	16%
NZ European	59%	48%
Māori	11%	18%
Pacific Island	15%	17%
Asian	23%	18%
Other	11%	11%

We see an over-index in non-voters amongst those aged below 55, Females, Māori and Pacific Islanders. However, NZ Europeans still make up the majority of the non-voter population.

So, what else do we know about the non-voter audience?

Interestingly, over half of non-voters said they had voted in the 2017 NZ General Election

Did you vote in the 2017 New Zealand General Election?



This shows that many Aucklanders are willing to engage with national politics – but not with local Auckland politics.

We need to understand why that is, and what we can do to drive engagement and participation.

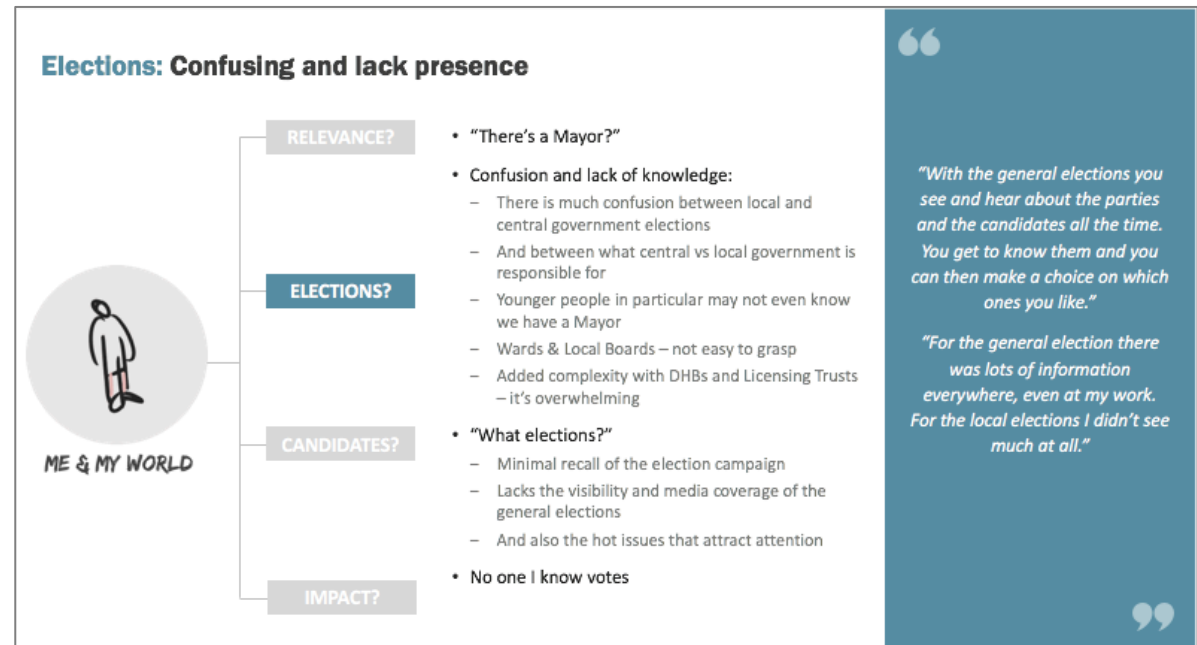
The qualitative findings point to some key reasons why this is the case

The General Elections are seen as much easier to understand and more relevant. Whereas the local elections, as well as council itself, are seen as complex and lacking relevance.

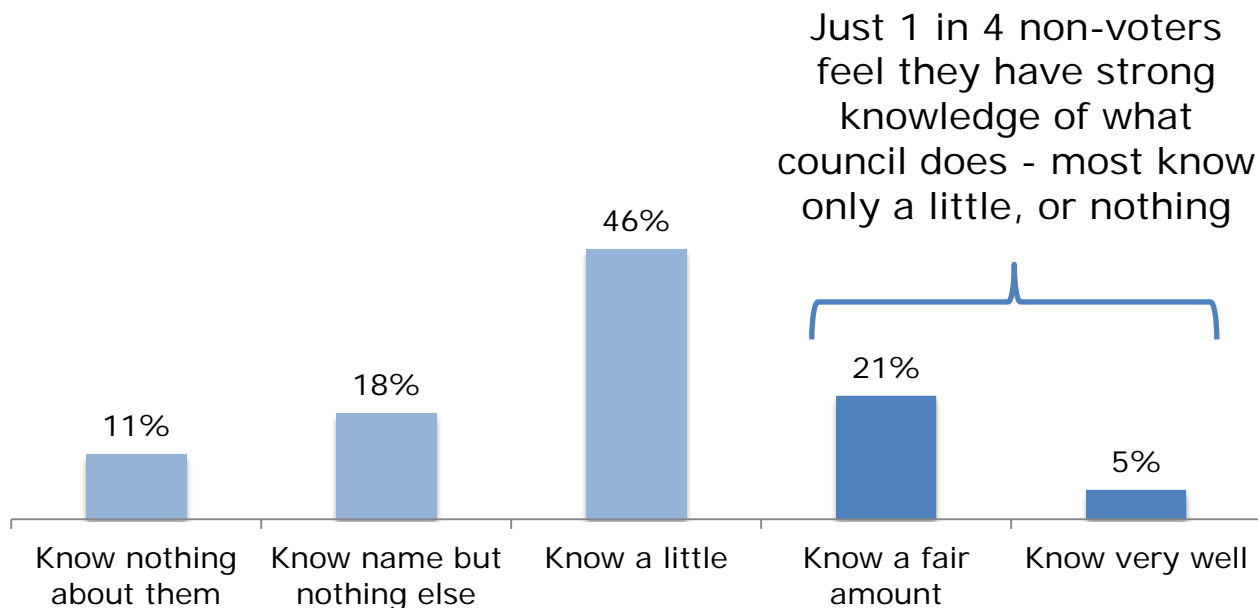
The local elections also lack the visibility and media coverage of the general election – which is critical for generating interest, and getting information they need about the key issues and who to vote for.

On top of that, low voter turnout means voting in local elections is not as normalised.

The wider survey of non-voters gives us some further insight here.



There is a lack of knowledge around Auckland Council amongst non-voters

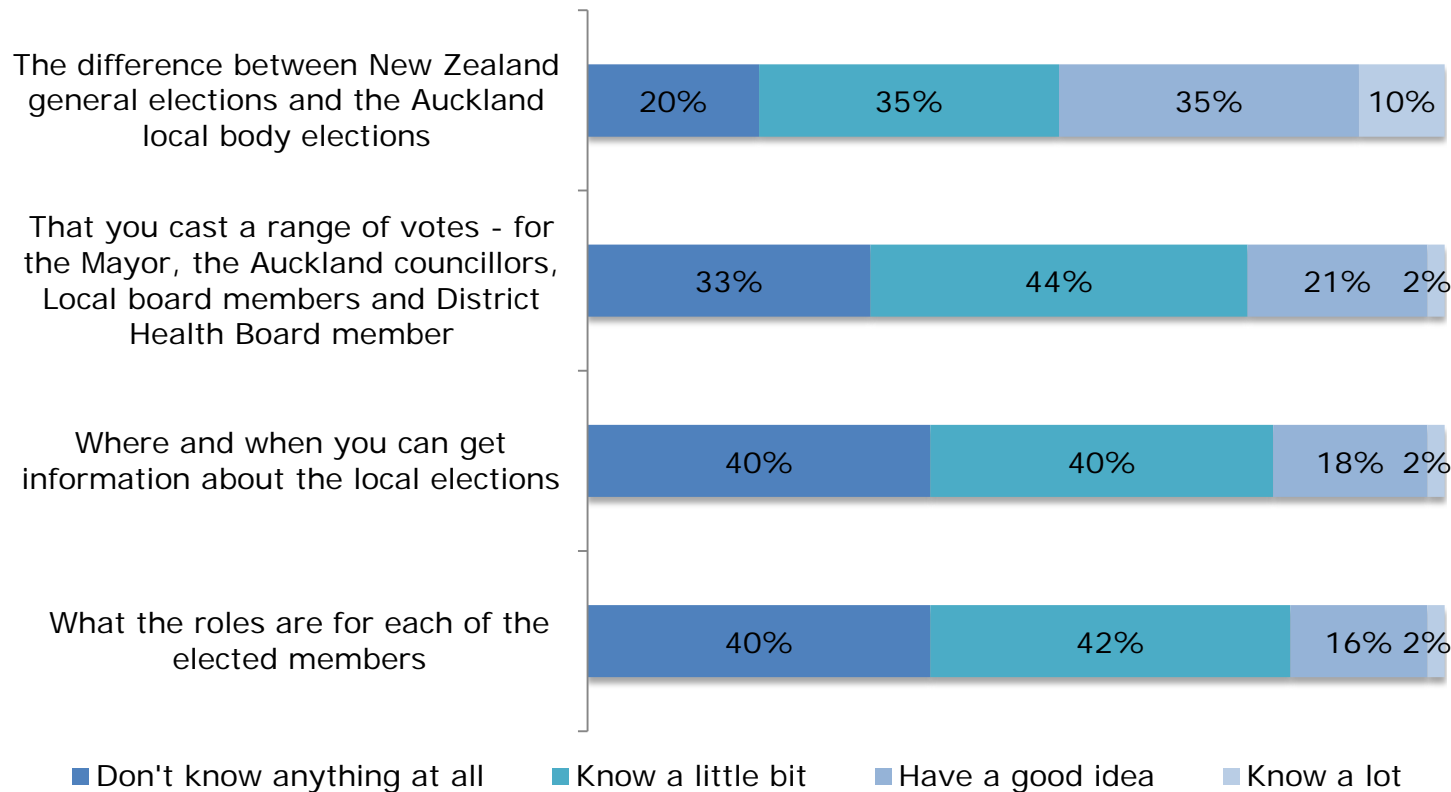


How well would you say you know Auckland Council, in terms of what they do?

And when we look across the key target audiences we see that knowledge around council is low across all of these groups:

- 18-24's – 19% have strong knowledge
- Māori – 18%
- Pacific Island – 19%
- Asian – 23%

Non-voters' knowledge around the Auckland local body elections is also relatively limited

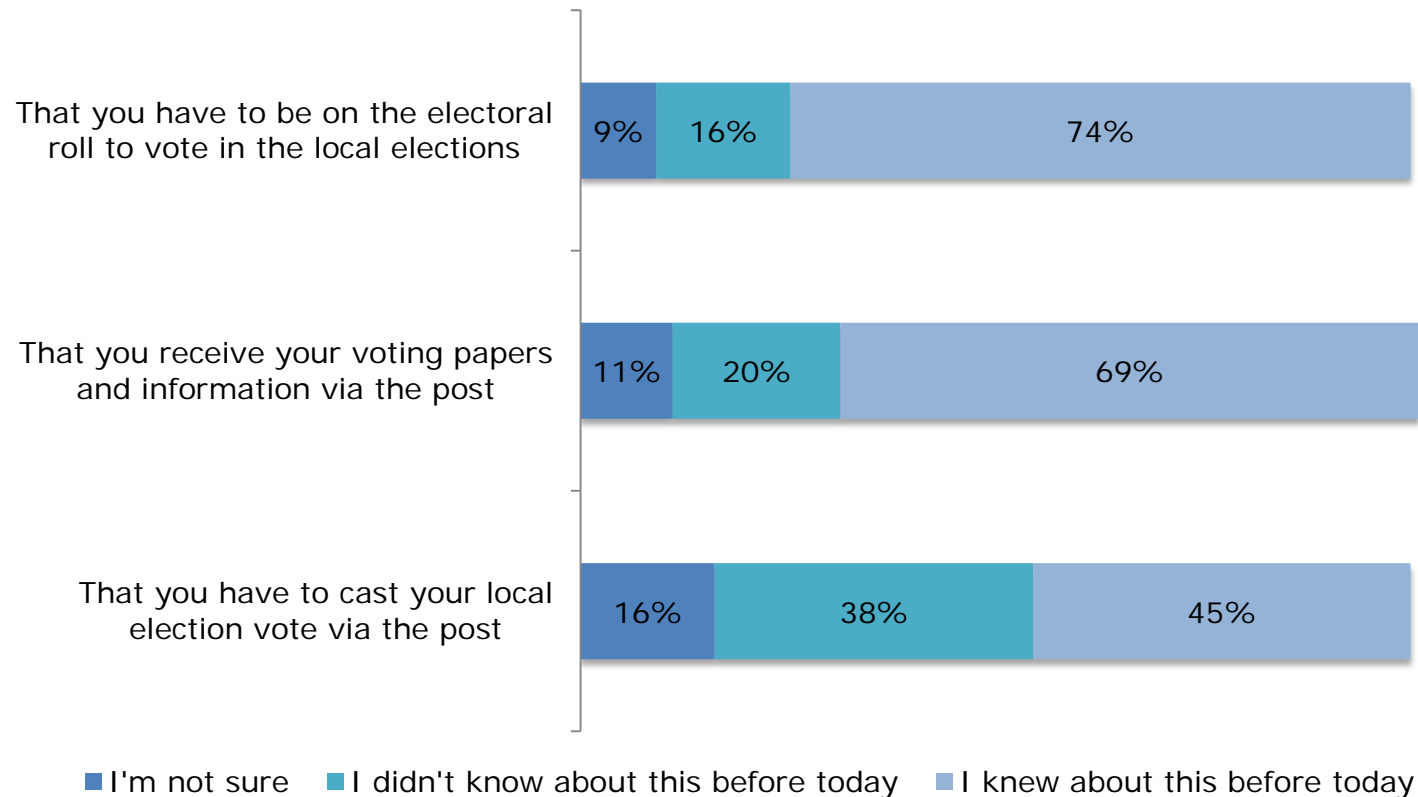


As we saw in the qualitative research, there is some confusion around the difference between the local body and general elections.

Knowledge is low around the fact that you cast a range of votes for different elected members, the roles that the different elected members play, and where and when they can get information about the elections.

Q3a - How much do you currently understand about each of these areas?

There is also a lack of knowledge around the election process of how you cast a vote



Most know that you need to be on the electoral roll and that you receive your voting papers via the post – though less than half know that you have to also cast your vote via the post.

Q3b - Which of these did you know about before today?

A lack of knowledge around council and the elections is a major barrier to voter participation

We've seen clearly in both the face to face conversations we've had with non-voters as well as the wider survey that there is limited understanding of the role that council plays, its structure and the different roles that elected members play within it.

This is leading to a lack of relevance around council in the eyes of many Aucklanders.

On top of this, there is a perceived lack of relevant information and visibility around the local body elections to drive engagement.

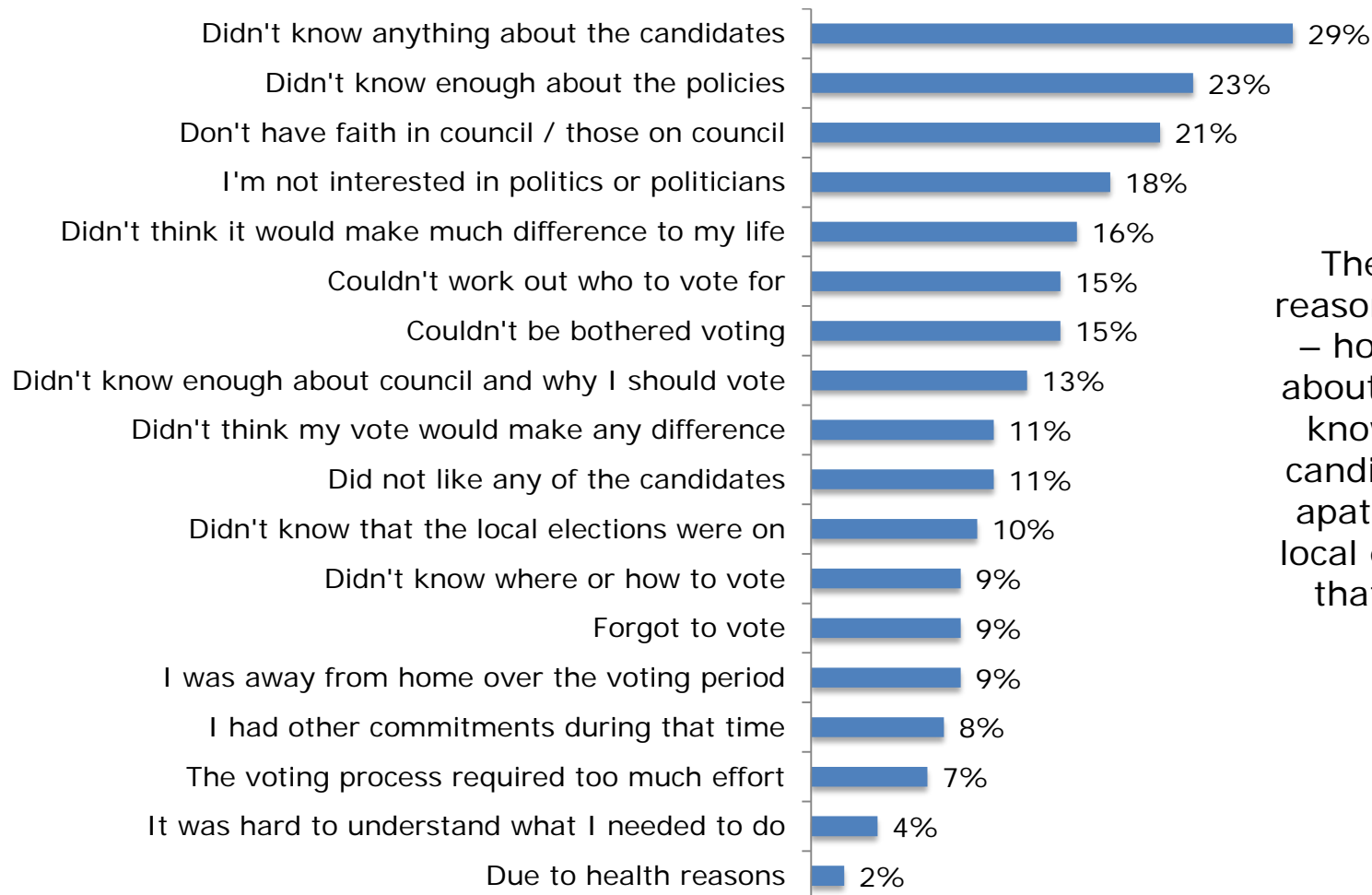
The product of this is a large proportion of the Auckland population lacking any strong motivation to vote.

"I don't really know anything about the council."

"I am not aware of how, when, and where to vote."

"I actually managed to miss that election, was it advertised?"

So, what are their specific reasons for not voting in the 2016 Auckland local elections?

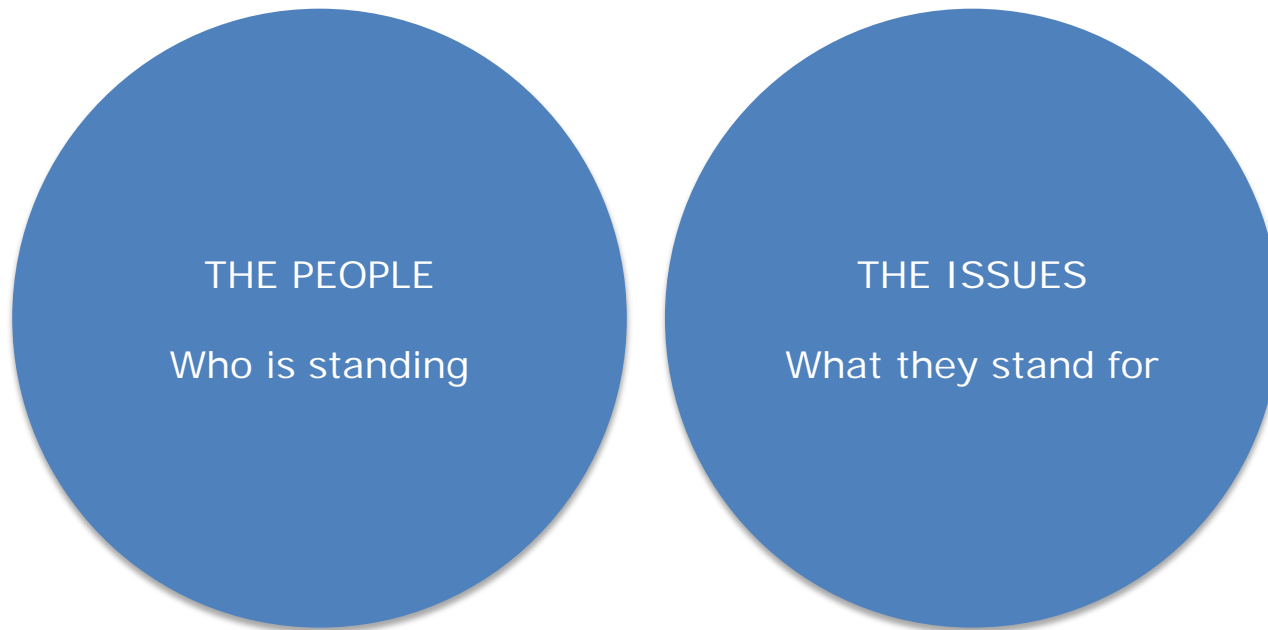


There are a wide range of reasons why people didn't vote – however, these are mostly about a lack of awareness and knowledge of the elections, candidates or council, general apathy towards voting in the local elections, or a perception that their vote won't make any difference.

Q1d - Which of the reasons below best describe why you did not vote in the 2016 Auckland local elections?

'People' and 'issues' are critical for driving relevance

The two biggest reasons for not voting in the last local elections are related to a lack of knowledge around:



They are looking for people and issues they can relate to – this is about giving people a strong reason to vote. It will be critical to drive visibility in these areas if we want to increase engagement.

There is little differentiation between ethnic groups when looking at their reasons for not voting

The key reasons for not voting in the local elections are largely the same across the different ethnic groups:

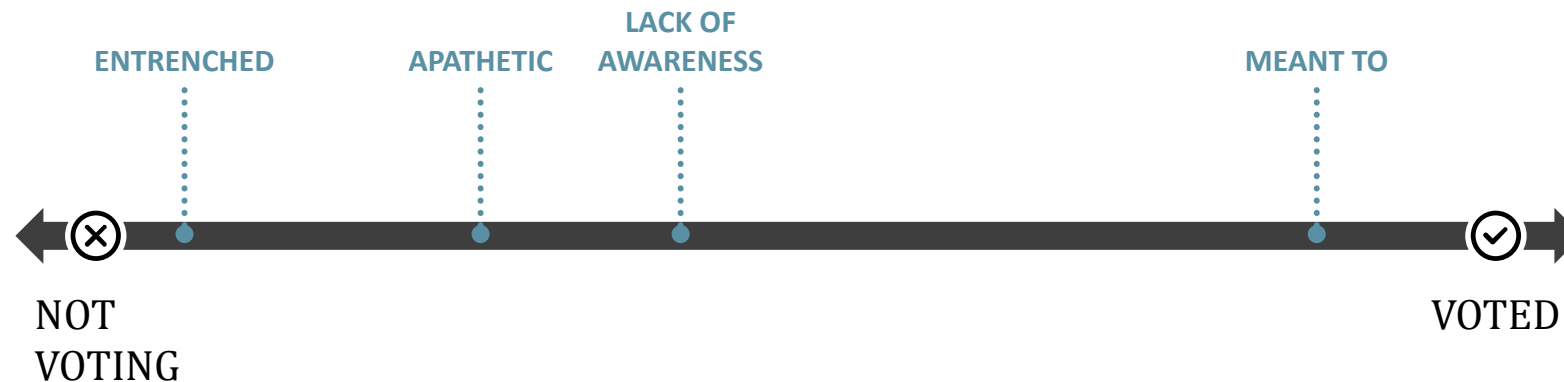
- A lack of awareness around the elections, candidates and policies
- Disengagement from politics and/or council
- A general apathy towards voting

So, it's less about looking at voting behavior by demographics and more about looking at it by people's attitudes - something we also saw in the qualitative research.

Non-voters group by their attitudes and behaviours towards voting in the local elections

There are specific groups within non-voters who sit on a continuum of non-voting attitudes and behaviour.

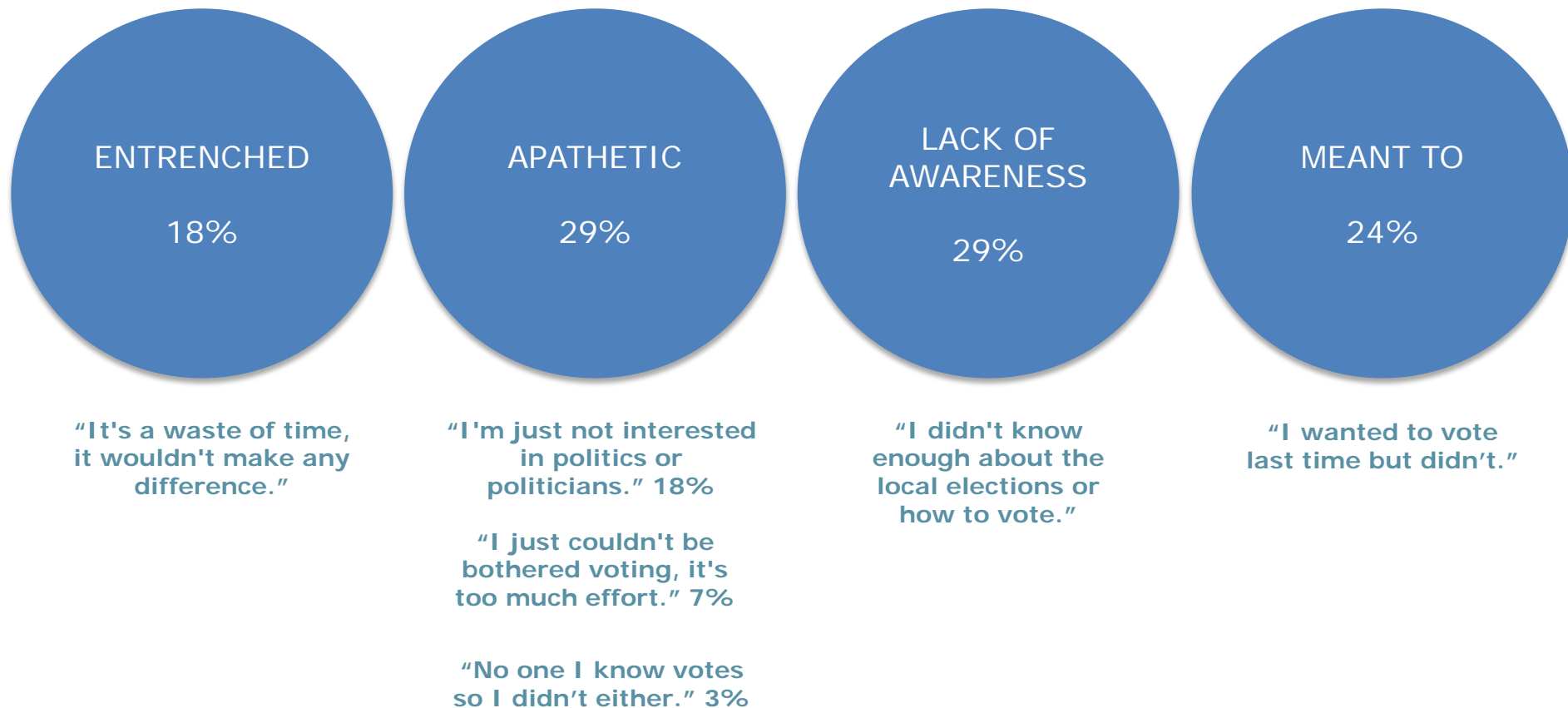
And the further up the continuum they are, they more likely they will be to vote – we need to better understand these groups, and how to shift them up the scale to voting.



Q1f - Which one of the following statements best describes your attitude to voting in the last Auckland local elections held in 2016?

So, how big are each of these non-voter groups?

Around 1 in 5 are entrenched – this means there is strong opportunity to drive awareness and engagement amongst the other 4 in 5 non-voters, and ultimately drive voting behaviour.



Q1f - Which one of the following statements best describes your attitude to voting in the last Auckland local elections held in 2016?

Entrenched (18% of non-voters)

Looking at the non-voter groups in greater detail

How do they differ to the other groups?

- Older on average – with more aged 35+ (83% vs 67% all non-voters) and especially those aged 55+ (34% vs 23%)
- Have a higher proportion of males (64% vs 43%)
- Have stronger knowledge around the local elections on average
- Are more likely to have voted in the NZ general election (68% vs 55%)

What are their main reasons for not voting?

- 36% - Don't have faith in council / those on council
- 32% - Didn't know anything about the candidates
- 27% - Don't think it will make much difference to my life
- 26% - Couldn't be bothered voting
- 22% - Didn't think my vote would make any difference

"It doesn't seem to matter if I vote or not. No one follows through, they are all just people trying to earn a living, not really trying to change the world."

"Is a waste of time as all you get is false promises."

Apathetic (29% of non-voters)

Looking at the non-voter groups in greater detail

How do they differ to the other groups?

- No real differences by demographic
- Have weaker knowledge around the local elections on average
- Are the least likely to have voted in the NZ general election (41% vs 55% all non-voters)

What are their main reasons for not voting?

- 31% - Don't have faith in council / those on council
- 29% - I'm not interested in politics or politicians
- 28% - Couldn't be bothered voting
- 27% - Didn't know anything about the candidates

"I have a limited interest in local body politics."

"I just couldn't be bothered with it."

"I'm not into politics, don't talk about it. If I voted it'd be blind voting because I don't know enough about any of the candidates or their policies."

Lack of awareness (29% of non-voters)

Looking at the non-voter groups in greater detail

How do they differ to the other groups?

- Younger on average – with more aged 18-34 (43% vs 33% all non-voters)
- Have a higher proportion of females (73% vs 57%)
- Have weaker knowledge around the local elections on average
- Are more likely to have voted in the NZ general election (62% vs 55%)

What are their main reasons for not voting?

- 40% - Didn't know anything about the candidates
- 35% - Didn't know enough about the policies
- 26% - Didn't know enough about council and why I should vote
- 17% - Didn't know that the elections were on
- 17% - Didn't know where or how to vote

"I knew nothing about the people standing for election."

"I did not have enough information to make an informed decision."

"I wasn't really aware of it happening."

Meant to (24% of non-voters)

Looking at the non-voter groups in greater detail

How do they differ to the other groups?

- Younger on average – with more aged 18-24 (24% vs 15% all non-voters)
- Have stronger knowledge around the local elections on average
- Are less likely to have voted in the NZ general election (54% vs 55%)

What are their main reasons for not voting?

- 33% - Wasn't in Auckland / was away over the voting period
- 13% - Didn't know anything about the candidates
- 13% - Didn't know enough about the policies
- 12% - Had other commitments during that time

"Forgot about it as I was really busy."

"I just didn't get around to it."

"I was out of the country at the time."

What does all this mean?

We know there are different groups of non-voters who have differing levels of engagement with council, knowledge of the elections, and interest in politics - at both a local and national level.

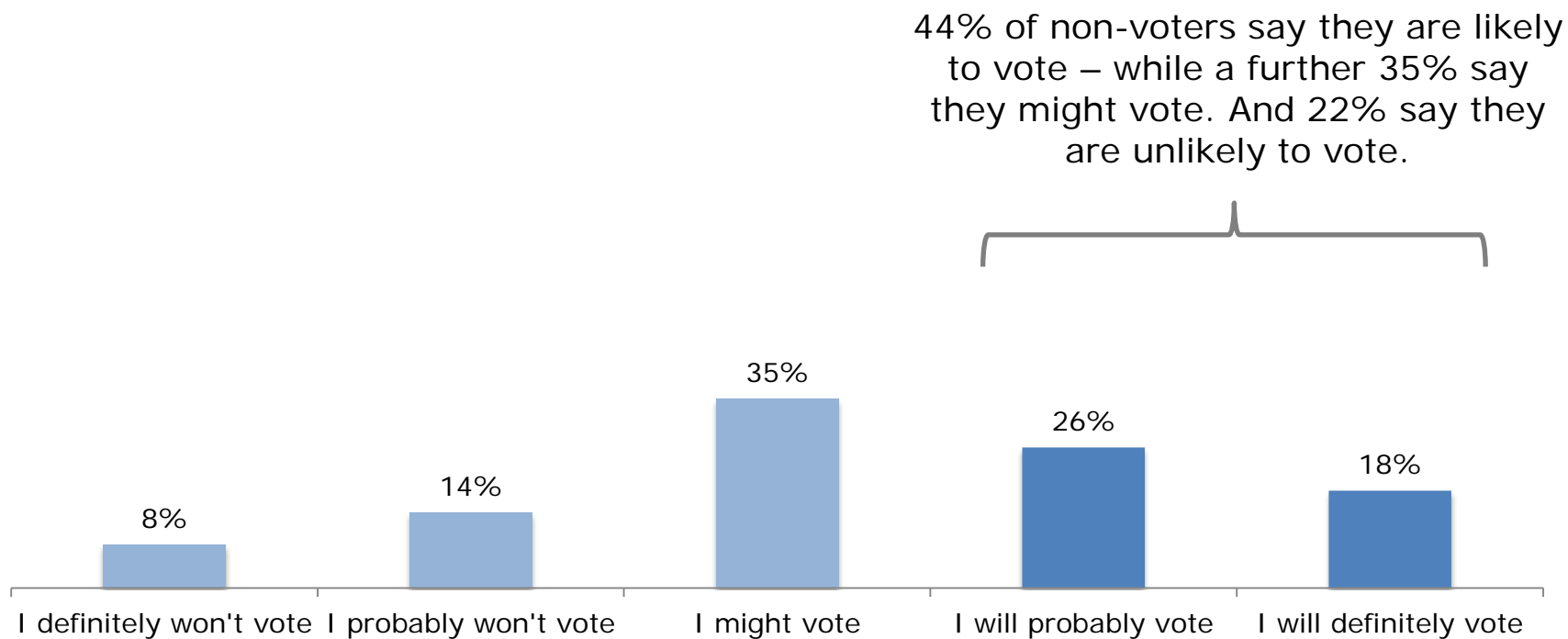
We need to understand how we can influence each of these non-voter groups to increase their knowledge of, and engagement with council and the local elections to increase their motivation to vote.



2.

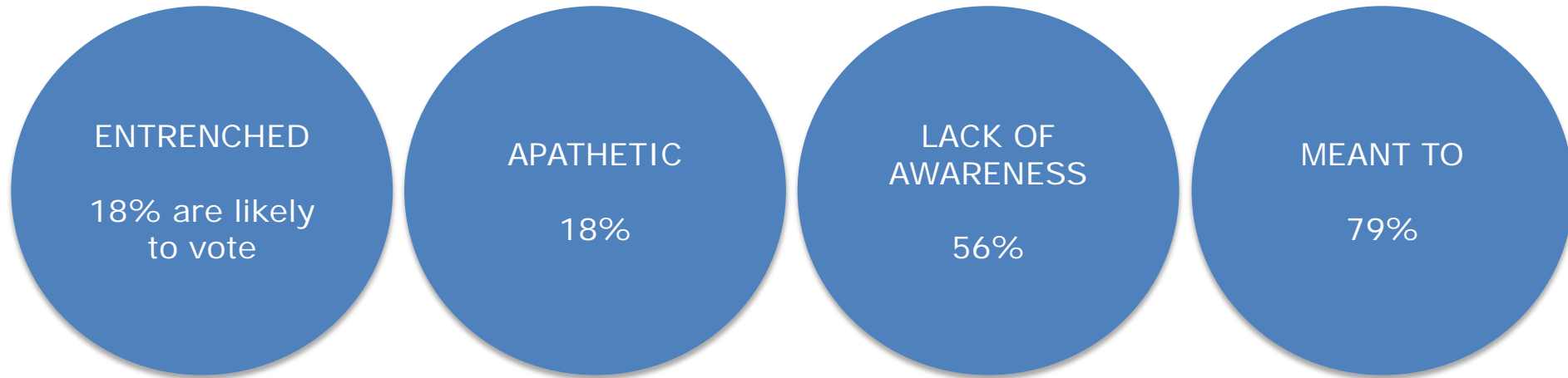
UNDERSTANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCREASING VOTER PARTICIPATION

Nearly half of non-voters say they are likely to vote in the 2019 Auckland local elections



Q1g - Thinking about the 2019 Auckland local elections that will be held later this year, how likely would you be to vote in this election?

Where people sit on the voter continuum has a major impact on their likelihood to vote



Those who are Entrenched or Apathetic are much less likely to vote in future.

We need to understand more about how we can get these groups more engaged with the local elections.

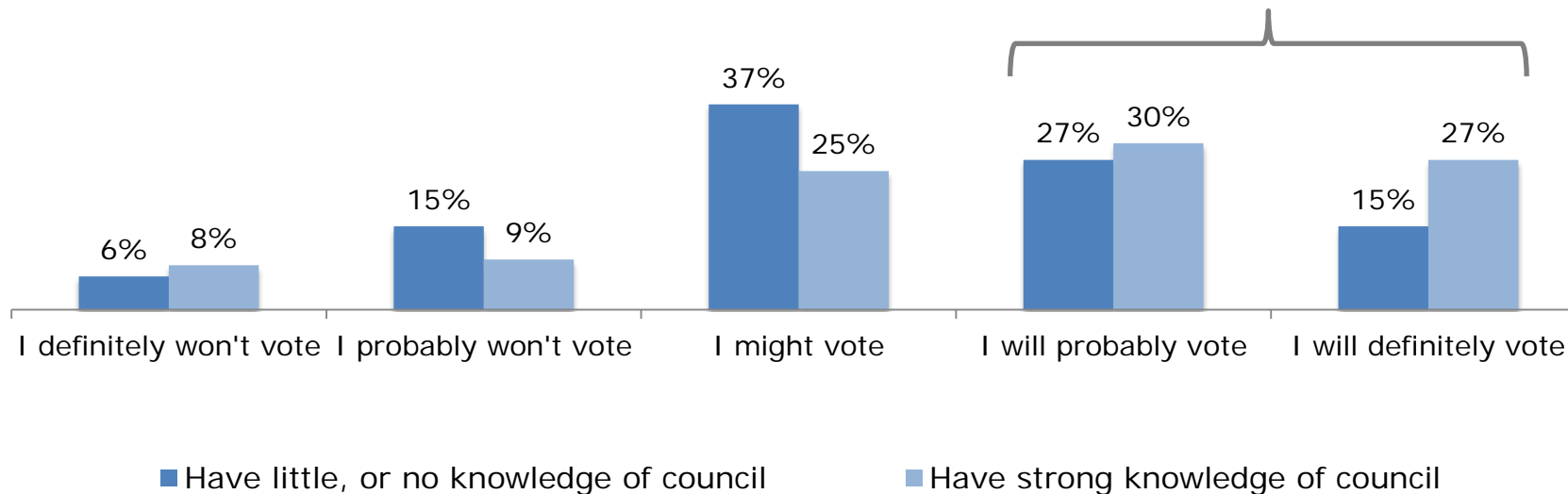
While those further along the continuum are much more likely to vote.

Providing sufficient relevant information around council and the elections, and reminders to vote, is likely to have a major impact on participation for these groups.

Those with stronger knowledge of council are more likely to vote

57% of those non-voters who have strong knowledge of council and what they do, say they likely to vote vs 42% with little, or no knowledge.

So, driving greater knowledge of council and its functions amongst the broader population is likely to have a positive impact voter participation.

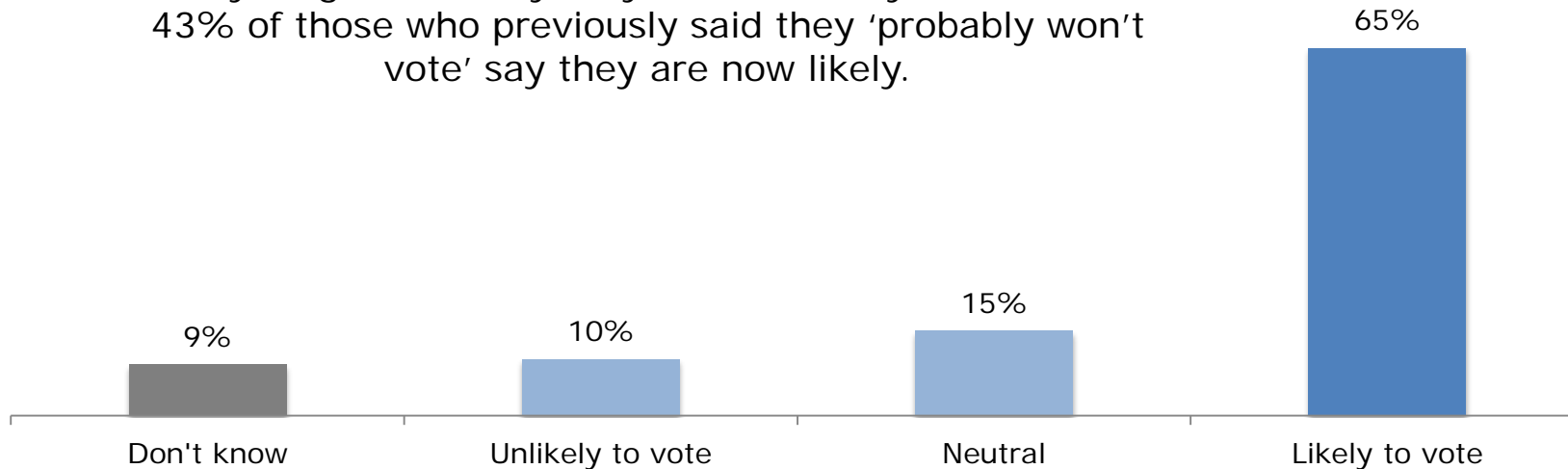


Q1g - Thinking about the 2019 Auckland local elections that will be held later this year, how likely would you be to vote in this election?

The ability to vote online has strong potential to impact on voting behaviour

65% of non-voters say they are likely to vote online (up from 44% current likelihood to vote).

And importantly 58% of those who previously said they 'might vote' say they are now likely to vote and 43% of those who previously said they 'probably won't vote' say they are now likely.



Q2c - How likely would you be to vote in the next Auckland local election later this year if you could vote online?

Online voting has strong potential to impact on the less engaged voter groups

	All non-voters	Entrenched	Apathetic	Lack of awareness	Meant to
Initial likelihood to vote	44%	18%	18%	56%	79%
Likelihood to vote online	65%	48%	49%	76%	86%
Impact of online voting	+21%	+30%	+31%	+20%	+7%

The ability to vote online has a significant impact on their likelihood to vote, especially for those who are Entrenched or Apathetic.

Q1g - Thinking about the 2019 Auckland local elections that will be held later this year, how likely would you be to vote in this election?
Q2c - How likely would you be to vote in the next Auckland local election later this year if you could vote online?



So, what would put them off, or stop them from voting online?

Outside of a lack of interest in politics or voting altogether, there were only two real issues that would put some off voting online.

Around 1 in 5 mention
how difficult it would be to do

"A complicated registration system."

"If the online system is hard to use."

"If it was time consuming or difficult to understand how to vote."

"Difficulty accessing computers."

While around 1 in 10 mention
privacy or data issues

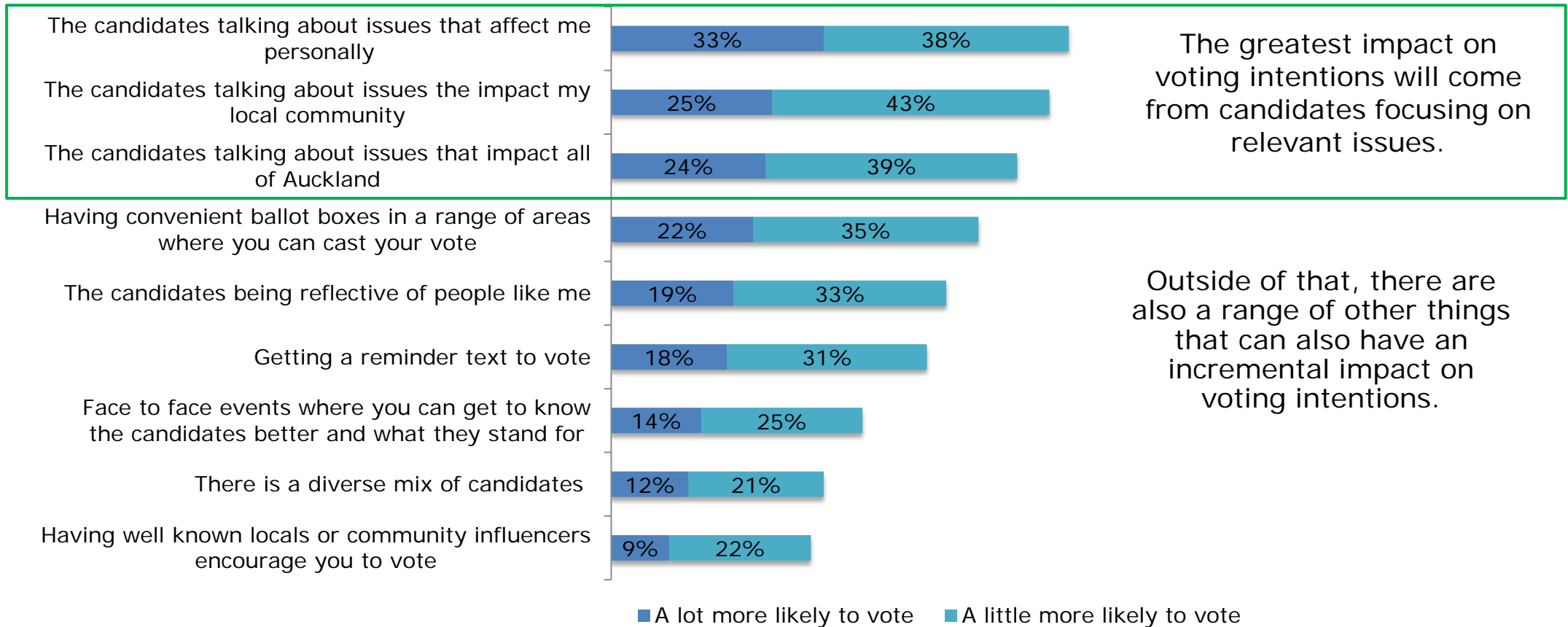
"Corruption of the whole system."

"Glitches, making sure no cheating, rather paper votes that can be traced correctly."

"Concerns around privacy and security."

"If I found out that personal information was accessible, like location."

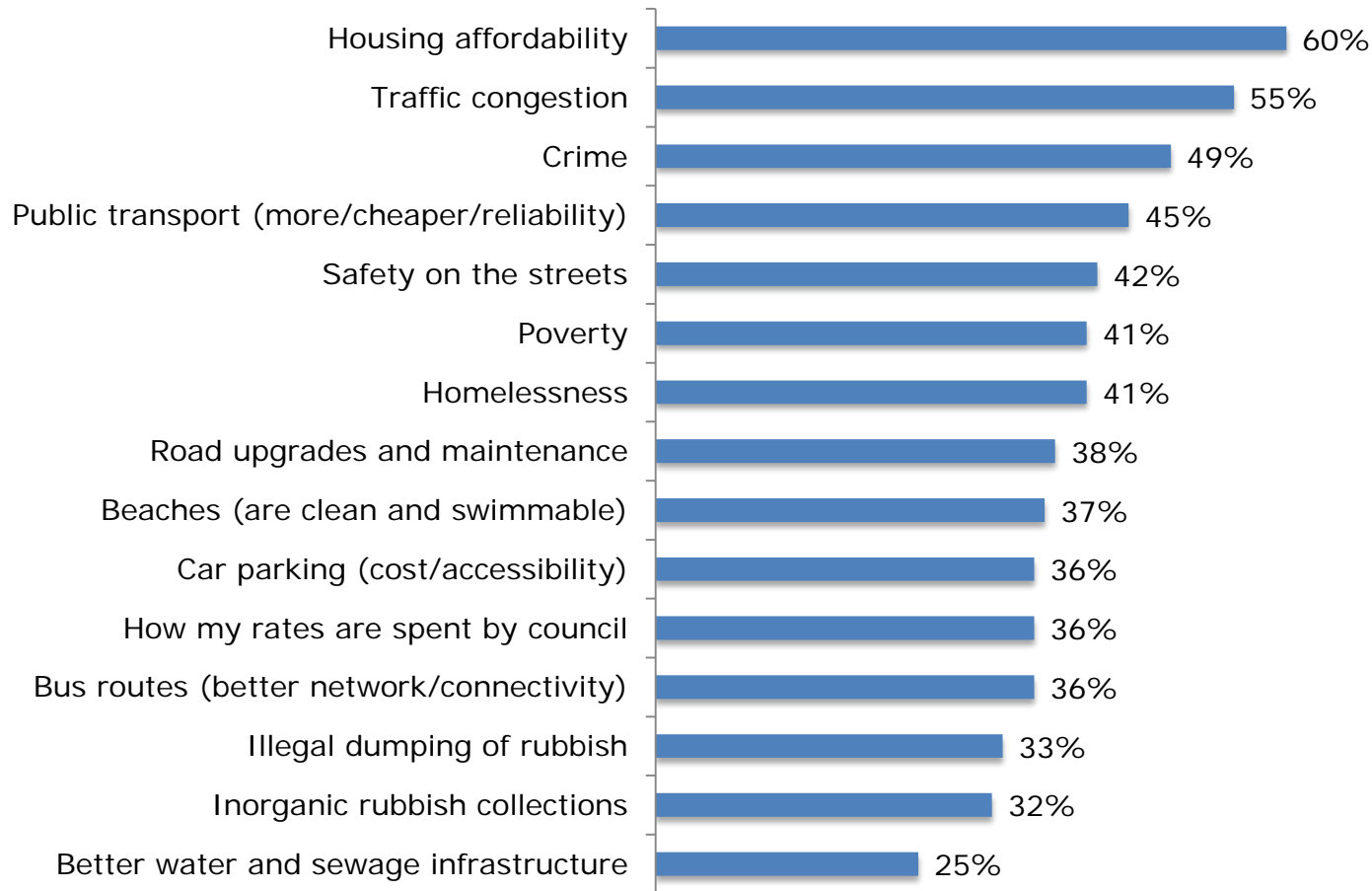
What other things would encourage them to vote?



Q2b - How would each of these impact on your likelihood to vote in the Auckland local elections?

So, what specific issues do they feel are important?

Top issues

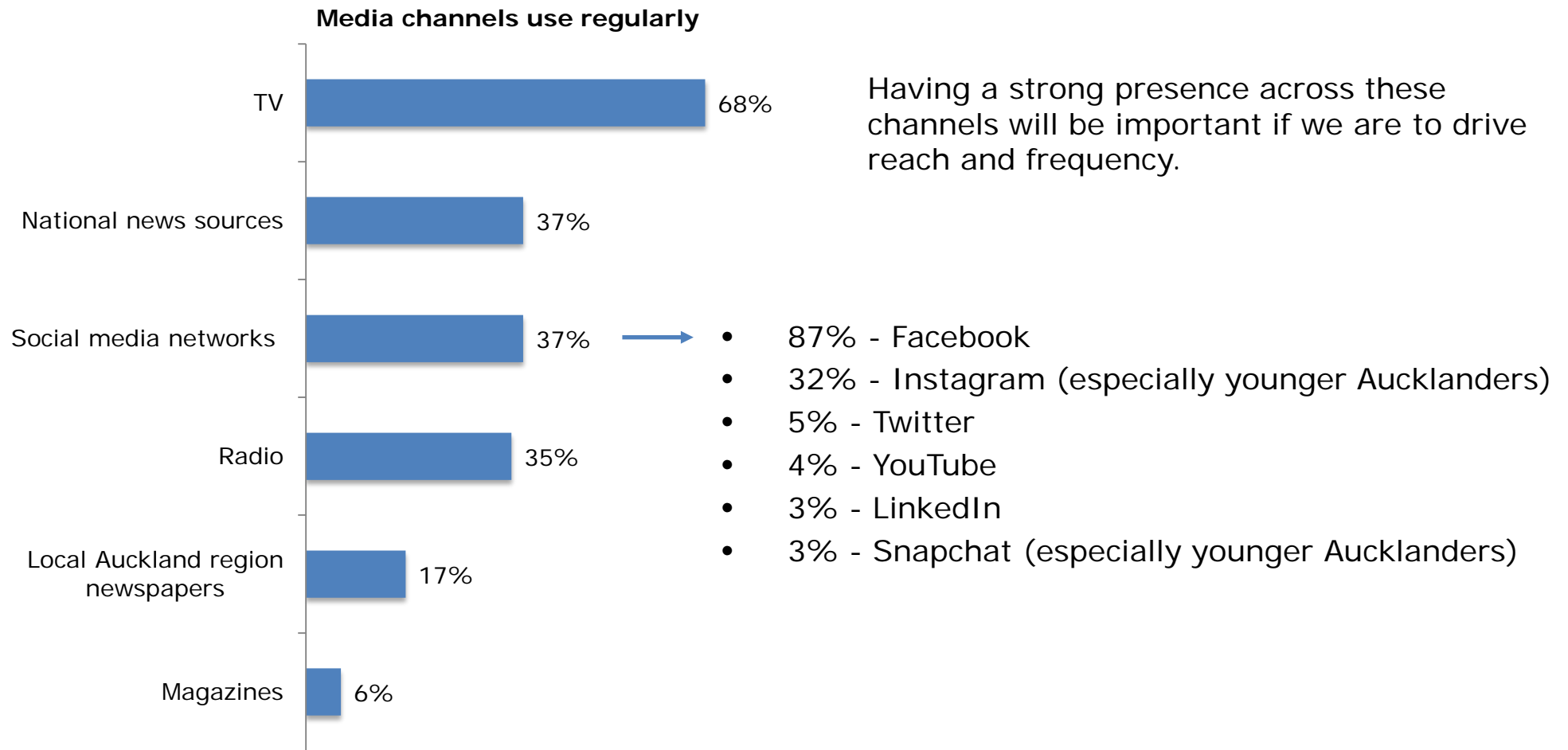


It's the large, visible things that impact on how desirable, affordable and liveable Auckland is that are important to most Aucklanders: housing affordability, traffic congestion and roading, crime and safety on the streets, public transport, poverty and homelessness.

Other less visible issues are important to fewer people.

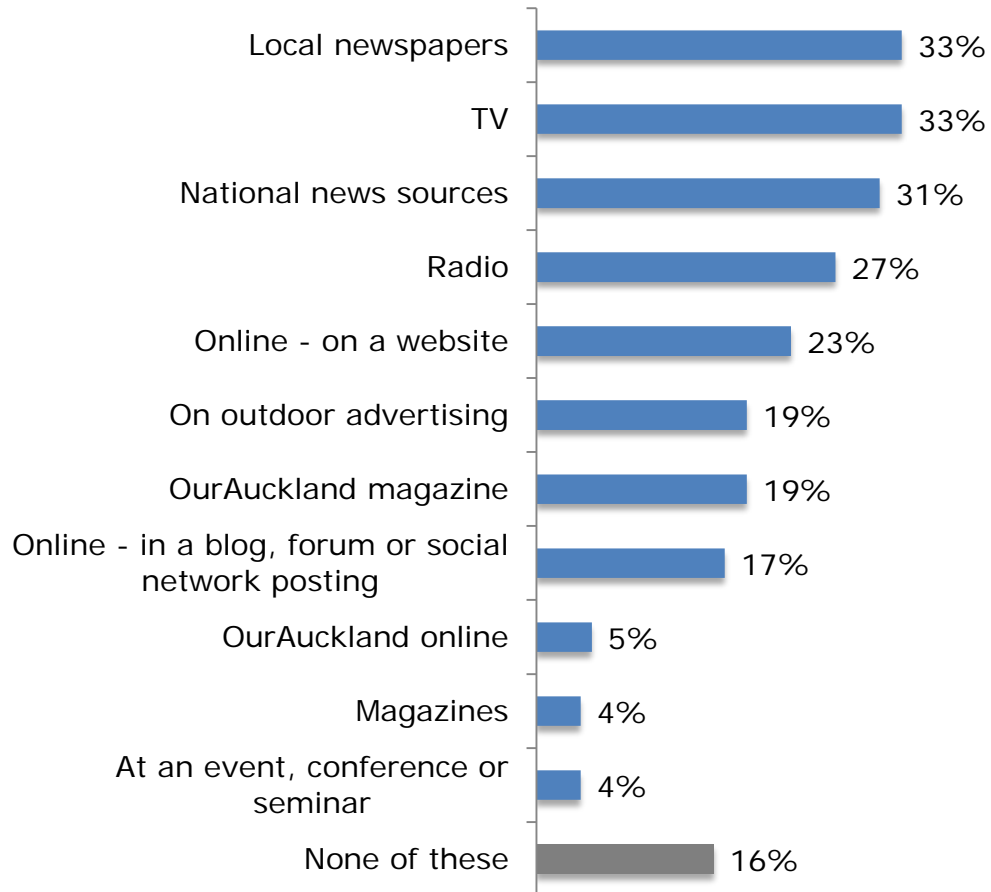
Q5b - Which of these specific issues do you feel are most important to you and your local community?

They are consuming media through a range of channels



Q5e - Which of the following media channels do you use regularly?

Where do they see and hear things about Auckland Council?



They are seeing or hearing about council through a range of channels.

We need to use those with the greatest reach to ensure any communications are seen and heard by large numbers of Aucklanders.



3.
**BRINGING
IT ALL
TOGETHER**

Looking at our understanding of the non-voter audience

We know we have an over-index amongst non-voters in key demographic groups – younger 18-34's, Māori, Pacific Islanders. However, we must not forget that the vast majority are made up of NZ European, and those aged 35+.



We must cater to all demographics when targeting non-voters – and be careful getting too niche with our targeting. Otherwise we risk alienating those who are not in the minority groups.

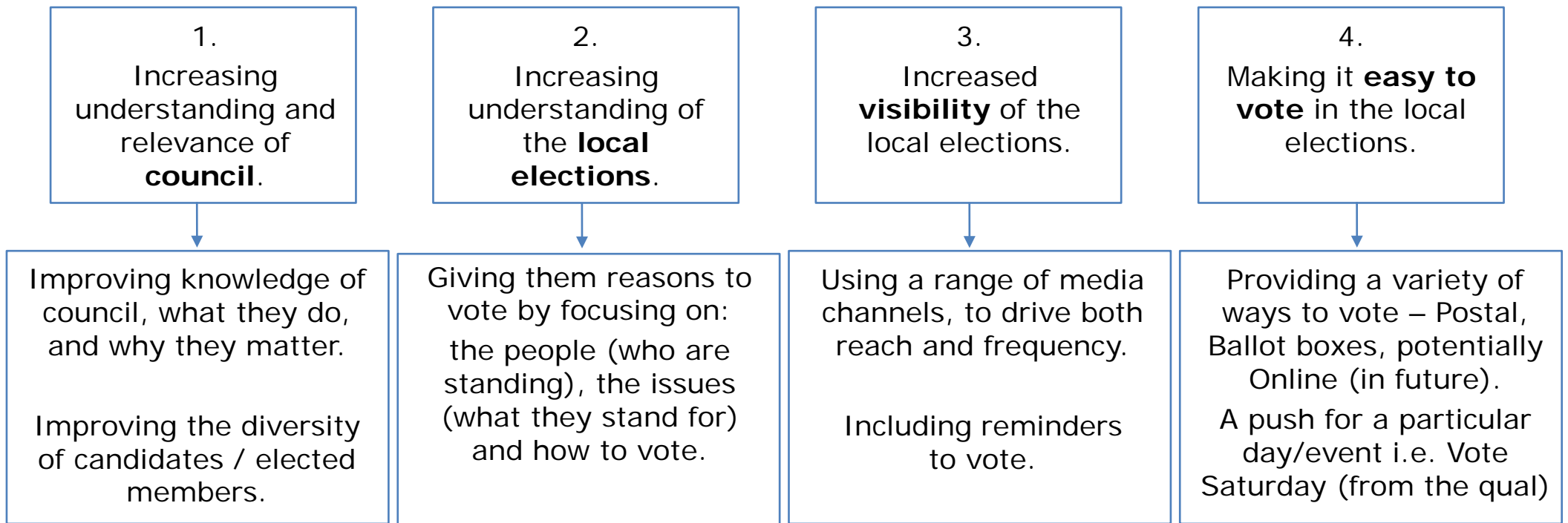
Non-voters can be clearly grouped by their attitudes towards voting in the local election. We are likely to have greater impact on voter participation by targeting these attitudes.



This is about giving them a reason to be interested in voting, a stronger motivation to vote, and reminders to vote.

Driving increased voter participation

Improving participation will not come from any single silver bullet. Improvement will come from employing a combination of initiatives to increase their motivation for voting.



Communicating with simple, short and punchy messages, bite sized chunks that can add up to a whole picture, diagrams/images/visuals, using specific tangible examples to connect with people, focusing on relevant or local things that affect me, conveying an emotive tone where possible, can include the use of humour.

NGĀ MIHI NUI



Smith Business Consulting is a local research and insights agency based in Mt Maunganui.

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