Increasing Voter Turnout in Auckland Local Government Elections: Results from a behavioural insights trial

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Te Kaunihera o Tāmaki Makaurau

Increasing voter turnout in Auckland local government elections: Results from a behavioural insights trial

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Executive summary

Auckland Council is responsible for facilitating and fostering participation in elections held under the Local Electoral Act 2001. Voter turnout in local elections has been declining in recent decades and it is therefore important we develop better ways to encourage Aucklanders to vote.

This report presents results from a large-scale field trial designed to test different ways of increasing voter turnout in the 2019 Auckland Council elections. The trial had three components:
- A randomised controlled trial of different postcard messages.
- A non-randomised trial of different election envelope designs.
- A randomised controlled trial of door-to-door canvassing.

Results

A range of messages had a positive impact on voter turnout, with quite different impacts for Māori and non-Māori electors.[1]

Positive social norm messages – that is, those that highlighted other Aucklanders' intentions to vote – had the strongest impact. Among non-Māori, receiving a postcard containing the message stating that "74% of Aucklanders are planning on voting. Join them and vote this election" led to a 4.1 per cent increase in turnout compared to a control group that received no postcard. Similarly, electors who received their voting papers in an envelope printed with a social norm message encouraging them to "join the hundreds of thousands of Aucklanders to vote" had 5.9 per cent higher relative turnout than those receiving a different message.

Other messages also had a significant effect on whether non-Māori voted:
- Highlighting the influence of Auckland Council politicians over important local issues (such as public transport, parks and playgrounds, roads, and water quality) increased turnout by 3.7 per cent.
- Appealing to people's sense of civic duty, by noting that democracy depends on people like them voting, increased turnout by 3.3 per cent.
- Reminding people their vote could be the decider between a candidate that represent their views and one that doesn't, and not to let someone else decide for them, increased turnout by 2.8 per cent.

For Māori, only one message appeared to have any impact on turnout. Reminding Māori electors that their vote could be the decider between a candidate that represents their views and one that doesn't, and not to let someone else decide for them, increased turnout by 3.2 per cent. No other postcard message had a significant impact on voter turnout amongst Māori electors, including those that included the concept of voting as a koha and te reo Māori translations.

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[1] An 'elector' is anyone who has the right to vote in an election.

Both postcard and envelope messages appeared to be more effective for Aucklanders aged 40+, indicating a need to further develop approaches to engage younger voters.

Having an in-person conversation with electors has the potential to have strong positive impacts, however the content of the conversation appears to matter.

People who were identified as having had a conversation with a canvasser (by asking their name and matching this name to the electoral roll) voted at a notably higher rate than those who lived in a house where no canvassing occurred (+26.8% relative difference).

There were notable differences in the observed impact of canvassing based on the script canvassers used and the Māori descent status of the person spoken to. Conversations with canvassers using the simpler script appeared to have a positive effect on both Māori and non-Māori, whereas conversations with canvassers using a script intended to elicit discussion about the issues residents cared about had a mildly positive impact on non-Māori and a negative impact on Māori.

Recommendations for future campaigns

The report highlights several recommendations for future election campaigns, including:

- Continue to investigate and trial ways of engaging Māori and young voters.
- Highlight positive social norms in relation to voting (and avoid negative social norms).
- Encourage social groups to vote through approaches such as 'vote tripling' (described in Section 5.4.2).
- Make voting a more publicly visible activity.
- Make voting more relevant by focusing on tangible issues.
- Make voting easier, with a particular focus on helping electors select their preferred candidates.

To our knowledge, this is the first time a large-scale randomised controlled trial of different ways of increasing voter turnout has been conducted in relation to New Zealand local government elections. It provides evidence for which messages resonate with New Zealanders and affect actual voter turnout. The findings provide a basis for future campaigns as well as further research into increasing voter turnout.

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1.0   Introduction

Voting is the foundation of New Zealand's representative democratic system, enabling the views of residents to be represented in local, regional and national decision making. Not all eligible New Zealanders understand how or why they should vote, or take up the opportunity to do so, however. Given the important role of democratic participation, research identifying ways of increasing voter participation is essential.

This is particularly the case for local government elections. Such elections take place every three years by postal vote. In Auckland, electors are asked to choose who they want to represent them as Mayor, ward councillor(s), local board members, district health board (DHB) members, and, in some areas of Auckland, alcohol licensing trust board members.

Since 2019, the Chief Executive of Auckland Council, like his/her counterparts across New Zealand, is responsible for facilitating and fostering representative and substantial elector participation in elections and polls held under the Local Electoral Act 2001.[2]

Voter turnout in Auckland's local elections has been trending down over the last three decades. This means Auckland Council needs to find better ways of engaging Aucklanders to vote.

During the 2019 local government elections Auckland Council's Research and Evaluation Unit (RIMU) worked in partnership with council's Elections Team to undertake a large-scale randomised controlled trial[3] exploring the efficacy of different ways of encouraging Aucklanders to vote, using a behavioural insights approach. The trial tested the impact of different engagement approaches and election-related messages on actual voter turnout. Trialling different messages to encourage electors of Māori descent to vote was an important aspect of the work.

This is the first such large-scale trial of this nature in New Zealand local government elections. The results will be useful to other local authorities across the country, as well as of interest to others involved in elections both locally and internationally.

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[2] Local Government Act 2002 section 42 (2) (da)
http://legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2002/0084/latest/DLM171859.html
[3] A randomised controlled trial (RCT) is a method for determining what works. At its core, it involves randomly assigning participants to either a treatment group or a control group and tracking outcomes for the groups over time. If enough people are included in each group and the randomisation is done correctly, it allows researchers to draw conclusions as to the causal impact of the treatment(s). This is because the design of the trial (randomisation etc.) excludes other explanations for differences between the groups. See Appendix A for more detail on how an RCT works.

1.1 Adopting a behavioural insights approach

Each election, Auckland Council invests significant amounts of time, effort and money into running campaigns designed to encourage Aucklanders to vote. However, it has been difficult to understand the overall impact of these campaigns, or to determine which aspects of the campaign were most impactful.

This trial sought to address this gap in understanding. It draws on an earlier review undertaken by RIMU of behavioural insights research in the area of elections and voter turnout.[4]

'Behavioural insights' is a field of research that draws upon the disciplines of cognitive, behavioural and experimental psychology as well as economics, and other social sciences. At its core, behavioural insights are focused on using knowledge of the social and environmental drivers of human behaviour to better develop programmes, policies and communications campaigns.

The improvements to communication campaigns and other interventions that are suggested by behavioural insights are often referred to as 'nudges'. These nudges tend to focus on small, cost-effective changes to the way communications are worded or the way systems are designed, to encourage behaviour without restricting people's choices or forcing them to behave in a certain way.[5] These often-small tweaks to wording and framing can, nevertheless, have significant impacts on behaviour.

1.2 What research tells us encourages people to vote

The review of behavioural insights research on increasing voter turnout mentioned above concluded that face-to-face engagement is likely to be the most effective engagement channel, followed by less personal forms of contact such as mail, text, and social media.

Beyond the relative differences between communication channels, the review also concluded that the impact on electors is highly dependent on message content. In summary, research shows that the following messages are most effective at raising voter turnout:
- Social pressure (e.g. comparison with one's neighbours) and social norm messages (i.e. information on what other people are doing) have been found to be one of the most powerful ways of boosting voter turnout.

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[4] Williams, M., Allpress, J. A and Rootham, E (2018). *Increasing voter turnout using behavioural insights*. Auckland Council technical report, TR2018/006.

[5] For an introduction to 'nudging' and behavioural insights see Thaler, R. H. and C. R. Sunstein. (2008) *Nudge: improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness*. New Haven: Yale University Press, and The Behavioural Insights Team (2014). *EAST: four simple ways to apply behavioural insights*, respectively.

- Communications that talk about voting as an identity-relevant behaviour (e.g. 'importance of being a voter') increase turnout much more than those that talk about voting just as a behaviour people do (e.g. 'importance of voting').
- Messages that express thanks and gratitude create positive expectations and feelings of reciprocity, and have been found to significantly boost voter turnout.
- Messages that are framed in terms of avoiding losses may resonate more strongly with voters (e.g. "Don't miss out on having your say").

In addition to message content, studies suggest the following as important:
- Messengers who are liked and trusted are more likely to be listened to. Demographics are also important: messengers who match the demographic characteristics of electors tend to be more effective.[6]
- Encouraging public commitments to vote can help people follow through on their intention to vote. Reminding people of their commitment at a later time has been found to amplify their effect.
- Making a plan for when and how to vote is another way of increasing follow through.
- Communications are more effective when their timing is matched to when people are most receptive to the message. The first few days after people receive their voting packs is likely a critical period.

Additionally, the review focused on how behavioural principles could be used to increase voter turnout by encouraging voters to attend to voting documents and more easily navigate the voting process:
- Initial attention and interest can be heightened by adding design features to voting documents, for example by:
  - Personalising forms as much as possible
  - Using handwritten notes to draw in attention
  - Using colour and other design features to direct attention
- Voting documents and candidate information sources should be re-evaluated with the intention of breaking the voting process down into basic steps, and making each step as simple as possible for voters.
- A number of nudges could be included in the voting pack to help people remember to return their voting forms.

Following the 2018 review, RIMU worked with Auckland Council's Elections Team to develop a range of engagement approaches and election-related messages to test in the context of the 2019 Auckland Council elections.

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[6] The importance of messengers is reflected in the phenomenon of social media 'influencers', who are often paid by companies to endorse products or services due to their ability to influence the behavior of their followers.

1.3 Developing approaches to encourage Māori Aucklanders to vote

New Zealanders of Māori descent are less likely to vote in both local and general elections (with turnout approximately 11 percentage points lower in both instances). [7,8] To date there has been very little research on ways to address this disparity in local elections. In order to develop potential ways of encouraging voter turnout amongst Māori we engaged with a range of Māori subject matter experts and community engagement practitioners to understand from their perspective how to best encourage Māori to vote. We contracted an evaluator with a kaupapa Māori research background to support this.

This engagement resulted in several suggestions that were incorporated into the trial:
- Inclusion of te reo Māori messages and translations.
- Highlight the connection between voting and issues that matter to individuals, their whānau and the wider community.
- Framing voting as a koha (a gift, offering, or contribution, especially one maintaining social relationships and having connotations of reciprocity) – an idea arising out of co-design sessions with rangatahi/youth.
- Use messages that normalise voting within Māori communities.
- Use collective message framing (e.g. focus the message on whānau, hapū or iwi rather than the individual).
- Target messaging by demographic characteristics (ethnicity, age, gender) where possible.
- Ensure Māori individuals are recruited to deliver door-to-door canvassing in areas with high Māori populations.

Additional suggestions that we were not able to test in this trial included:
- Use Māori community champions as messengers.
- Use humorous messaging.
- Include a greater focus on civic engagement in school curricula.
- Focus specifically on rangatahi/youth.

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[7] Māori descent here refers to anyone who stated they were of Maori descent when they enrolled. This is independent from whether those individuals choose to vote in general elections via the general roll or the Māori roll.

[8] For more detail on who did and did not vote in the 2019 Auckland Council elections, see Allpress, J. A. (2020). *2019 Auckland local election voter turnout. Who did and did not vote?* Auckland Council report.

1.4   The trial's three components

The trial had three distinct and separate components, namely:
- A randomised controlled trial of different postcard messages, sent to approximately 130,000 Aucklanders.
- A non-randomised trial of different election envelope designs, sent to all 1+ million potential voters.
- A randomised controlled trial of door-to-door canvassing involving 97,503 Aucklanders.

The methods and results for each of the three trail components are described in separate sections below.

1.5   Tracking results against voter turnout and measuring the causal impact on voter behaviour

Two important aspects of this research were the ability to track actual voter turnout, and to determine the causal impact of messages on turnout.

Tracking actual voter turnout was possible by accessing the electoral roll for research purposes prior to the election, using that database to contact a random selection of electors and subsequently matching this data with election records of whether an individual had voted. This data matching was done in a way that maintained the anonymity of all electors.

Determining the causal impact of messages on voter turnout was possible due to the use of a randomised controlled trial (RCT) research design for the postcard and door-to-door canvassing aspects of the research. An RCT involves randomly assigning participants to either a treatment group or a control group and tracking outcomes for the groups over time. When done well, such a trial excludes other explanations for differences between the groups in the measured outcome (in this case, voting).

Further methodological detail is provided on how turnout was tracked and how the RCTs were designed in Appendix A.

2.0   Postcards

Six different postcard messages were tested. Each postcard drew on previous research and/or one or more behavioural principles. The concepts underlying the postcards are described below, and the postcards themselves shown in Table 1.

- **Deciding vote:** People are more likely to perform a behaviour if they feel that behaviour is likely to bring about the desired outcome.[9] In the case of voting, we operationalised this concept in a message focused on how an individual's vote could be the decider between a candidate that represents their views and one that doesn't.
- **Loss aversion:** Research indicates that losses are felt more strongly than equivalent gains (e.g. losing $20 causes more pain than finding $20 does happiness).[10] Messages that frame action or inaction in terms of potential losses rather than potential gains have often been found to have stronger impacts on behaviour.
- **Appeal to democracy:** Previous studies have attempted to increase voter turnout by appealing to civic duty.[11] We developed a message that reminded people that New Zealand's democracy depends on people like them voting.
- **Gratitude:** Previous studies found that messages that express thanks and gratitude significantly increase voter turnout amongst those who receive them. We trialled pre-emptively thanking people for voting.
- **Local issues:** Many Aucklanders are not fully aware of how much local government impacts their daily life. We developed a message that highlighted how Auckland Council politicians influence issues such as the quality of public transport; sports fields, parks and playgrounds; the water quality at local beaches; and roads and car parking.
- **Social norms:** People are influenced by what others around them are doing, thinking and feeling. Social norm messages (statements about what others are doing) have been shown to influence people in a range of different circumstances.[12] We developed two different social norm messages that focussed on the percentage of Aucklanders who were planning to vote in the 2019 local elections for Auckland as a whole, and Māori Aucklanders, respectively.
- **Koha:** Council engagement staff conducted co-design sessions with rangatahi Māori (youth) to explore ideas for engaging this cohort in elections. One idea that was that

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[9] Consistent with the concept of 'self-efficacy' in the Theory of Planned Behaviour:
Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 50,* 179-211.

[10] Kahneman, D. and Tversky, A. (1979). "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk". *Econometrica.* 47 (4): 263-291

[11] Gerber, A.S., Green, D.P. and Larimer, C.W. (2008). Social pressure and voter turnout: evidence from a largescale field experiment. *American Political Science Review, 102,* 33-48.
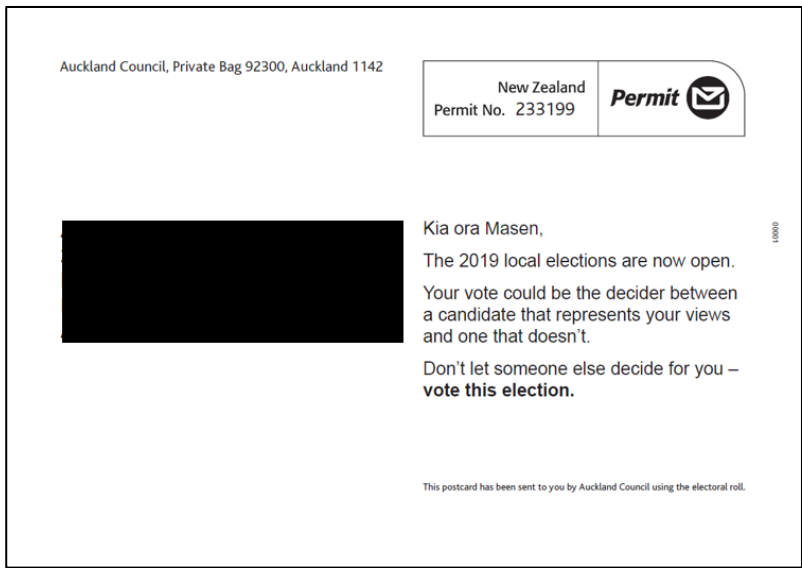
[12] Cialdini, R. B., and Trost, M. R. (1998). Social influence: Social norms, conformity and compliance. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, and G. Lindzey (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (p. 151-192). McGraw-Hill.

developed from this engagement was to frame voting as a koha (a gift, offering, or contribution, especially one maintaining social relationships and has connotations of reciprocity). A message was developed along these lines.

Postcards were sent at the start of the election period and were timed to arrive at the same time or slightly after the voting packs. Voting packs were sent on Friday 20 September 2019 and postcards were sent on Monday 23 September 2019.

The postcard design and messages are shown below in Table 1. The table also indicates whether a given postcard was designed to be sent to any elector, Māori electors only, or non-Māori electors only.

Table 1. Postcard messages

Backing image used for all six postcards. Colour was used to ensure the postcard stood out. A clear call to action of 'vote now' was featured, and reminders of key dates provided. The design was consistent with the broader communications campaign.	
Postcard 1: 'Deciding vote + loss aversion'. Sent to both Māori and non-Māori electors. Behavioural basis: Potential deciding vote / self-efficacy Loss aversion	

Postcard 2:

'Democracy appeal + gratitude'

Sent to both Māori and non-Māori electors

Auckland Council, Private Bag 92300, Auckland 1142

New Zealand
Permit No. 233199

Permit 📧

Kia ora Mita,

The 2019 local elections are now open.

New Zealand's democracy depends on people like you voting. Thank you for making this a priority.

Thanks for voting these elections.

This postcard has been sent to you by Auckland Council using the electoral roll.

Postcard 3:

'Local issues'

Sent to both Māori and non-Māori electors

Auckland Council, Private Bag 92300, Auckland 1142

New Zealand
Permit No. 233199

Permit 📧

Kia ora Rhiannon,

The 2019 local elections are now open.

Your Auckland Council politicians make decisions about lots of things that affect your daily life, such as:

• The quality of public transport
• Sports fields, parks and playgrounds
• The water quality at your local beach
• Roads and car parking

If you care about how these issues affect you and your family – **vote!**

This postcard has been sent to you by Auckland Council using the electoral roll.

Postcard 4:

'Social norm – Auckland-wide'

Sent to non-Māori electors only

Statistics were obtained from a pre-election survey of Aucklanders

Auckland Council, Private Bag 92300, Auckland 1142

New Zealand
Permit No. 233199

Permit 📧

Kia ora Ellis,

The 2019 local elections are now open.

74% of Aucklanders are planning to vote. Join them and **vote this election!**

This postcard has been sent to you by Auckland Council using the electoral roll.
Statistics were obtained from a representative survey of Aucklanders.

Postcard 5:

'Social norm – Māori specific + full reo Māori translation'

Sent to Māori electors only

Statistics were obtained from a pre-election survey of Aucklanders

Auckland Council, Private Bag 92300, Auckland 1142

New Zealand Permit No. 233199 | Permit

Kia ora Herbert,

Kua tuwhera ngā pōti ā-rohe 2019.

67% ngā Māori o Tāmaki Makaurau e whakarite ana ki te pōti. Tūhono mai ki a rātou ka **pōti ai i tēnei pōtitanga!**

The 2019 local elections are now open.

67% of Māori in Tāmaki Makaurau are planning to vote. Join them and **vote this election!**

This postcard has been sent to you by Auckland Council using the electoral roll. Statistics were obtained from a representative survey of Aucklanders.

Postcard 6:

'Vote as a koha + part translation'

Sent to Māori electors only

Auckland Council, Private Bag 92300, Auckland 1142

New Zealand Permit No. 233199 | Permit

Kia ora Lillian,

The 2019 local elections are now open.

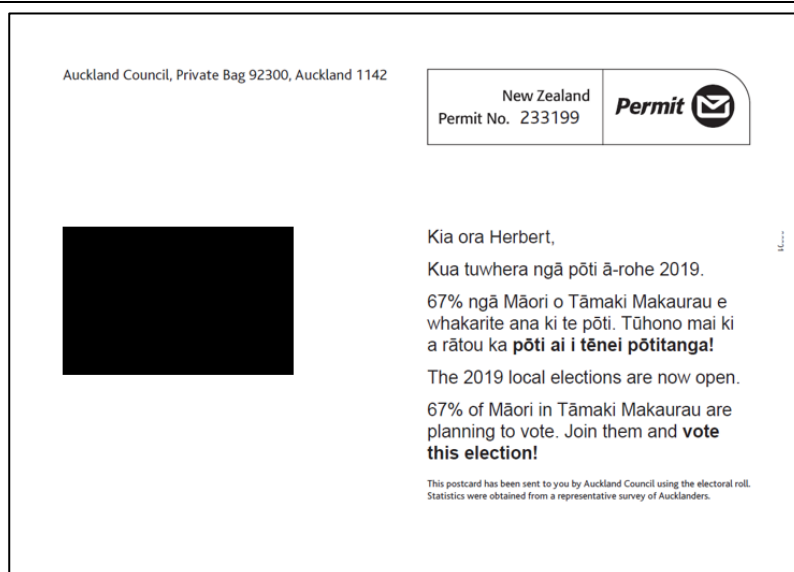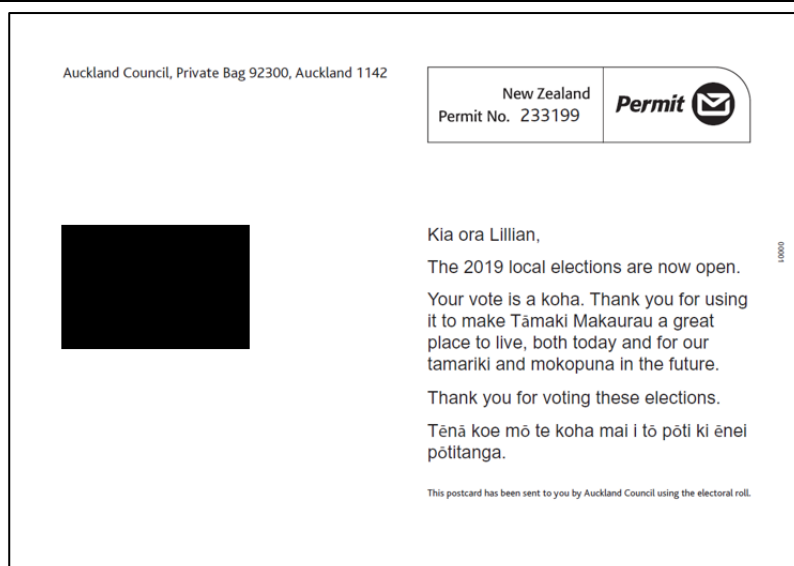Your vote is a koha. Thank you for using it to make Tāmaki Makaurau a great place to live, both today and for our tamariki and mokopuna in the future.

Thank you for voting these elections.

Tēnā koe mō te koha mai i tō pōti ki ēnei pōtitanga.

This postcard has been sent to you by Auckland Council using the electoral roll.

2.1 Design

Because Māori and non-Māori electors could potentially receive different postcards, the sampling process, where electors were randomly selected to receive one of the six possible postcards, was done for Māori and non-Māori separately. People were chosen to receive a postcard in two steps. First, a household was randomly selected, then an individual within the household was randomly selected. Each postcard version was sent to between 12,319 and 16,963 people.

See Appendix B for more details on how electors were selected to receive a postcard.

2.2 Results

Because Māori and non-Māori electors received different combinations of postcards, the results for these two groups are shown separately below. For each postcard we tested statistically[13] whether the voter turnout rate differed from the control group (i.e. electors who lived in a household that did not receive a postcard).

Note, the interventions tested here (single postcards) are relatively small in scale, and as such we would expect their impact on voting behaviour, on their own, to be small to moderate. Indeed, international research indicates that the best direct mail interventions might increase turnout by 1-3 percentage points. It would be unreasonable to expect such measures to reverse dramatic declines in voter turnout that have occurred over many decades.

The results are nevertheless important, as they tell us which messages (if any) have a positive causal impact on voter behaviour. If the most impactful messages were to be amplified across a whole election campaign in the future, and/or when combined with other interventions (such as those outlined in Section 5.3), we would expect the magnitude of their impact to be significantly larger.

Note also that because of the research design, the large number of individuals receiving each postcard (12,319 or more for each version), and the statistical testing used, we can say with confidence that any statistically significant differences we see in voting behaviour between postcard groups is due to the postcards themselves.

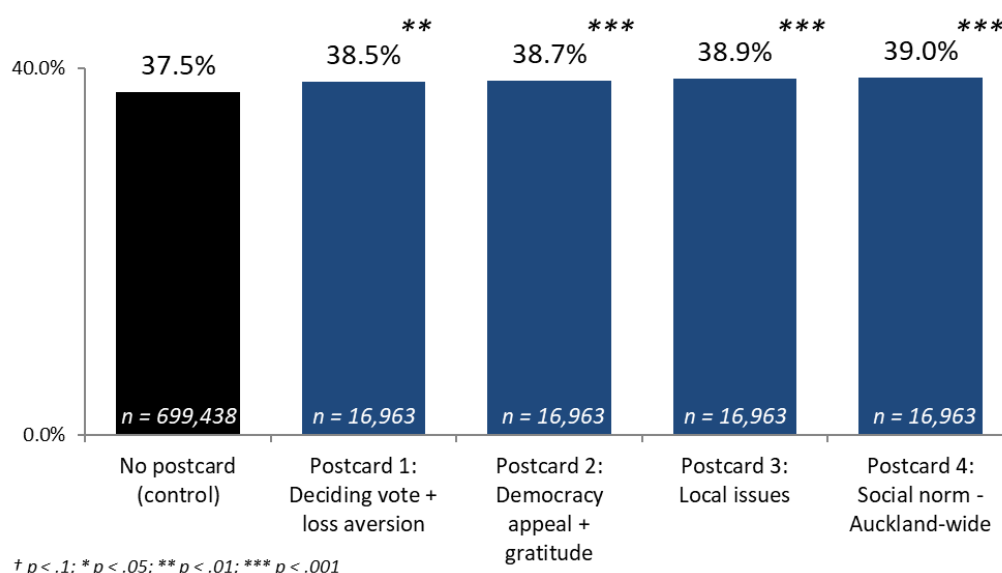### 2.2.1 Non-Māori electors

All four postcard versions had a small but statistically significant positive impact on voter turnout. Compared to the control group of electors who did not receive a postcard (37.5% of whom voted), each message had the following impact:

- **Postcard 1:** Reminding people their vote could be the decider between a candidate that represents them and one that doesn't, and not to let someone else decide for them, increased turnout by 2.8 per cent (an absolute increase of 1.0 percentage point; $p < .01$).
- **Postcard 2:** Appealing to people's sense of civic duty by noting that democracy depends on people like them voting, and thanking them for doing so, increased turnout by 3.3 per cent (an absolute increase of 1.2 percentage points; $p < .001$).
- **Postcard 3:** Highlighting the influence of Auckland Council politicians over important local issues (such as public transport, parks and playgrounds, roads, and water quality), and encouraging people to vote if they care about those issues, increased turnout by 3.7 per cent (an absolute increase of 1.4 percentage points; $p < .001$).

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[13] Using binary logistic regression.

- **Postcard 4:** Telling people that 74 per cent of Aucklanders were planning on voting (a positive social norm message) and encouraging recipients to join them and vote, increased turnout by 4.1 per cent (an absolute increase of 1.6 percentage points; $p <$ .001).

Figure 1. Impact of different postcards on voter turnout amongst non-Māori electors

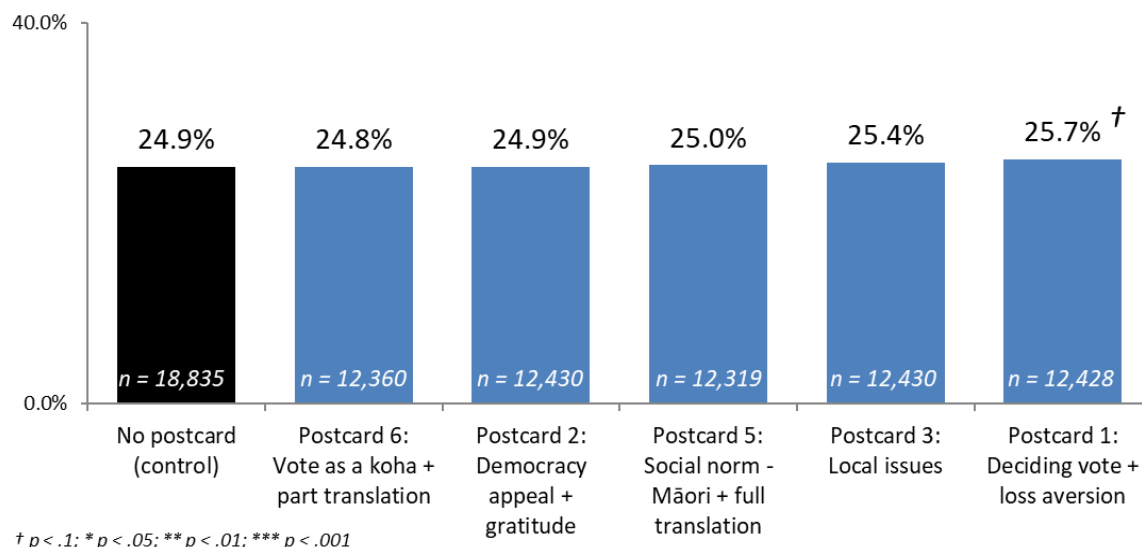$\dagger\ p < .1;\ *\ p < .05;\ **\ p < .01;\ ***\ p < .001$

2.2.2 Māori electors

For Māori electors, only one of the postcard messages appeared to have an impact on voting, although this effect was only marginally statistically significant. It appears that the message on postcard 1 highlighting to Māori electors that their vote could be the decider between a candidate that represents them and one that doesn't, and not to let someone else decide for them increased turnout by 3.2 per cent (an absolute increase of 0.8% percentage points; $p <$ 0.1).

No other postcard message had a significant impact on voter turnout amongst Māori electors, including the messages that included the concept of voting as a koha and those containing genuine te reo Māori translations (all ps > 0.3).

Figure 2. Impact of different postcards on voter turnout amongst Māori electors

	No postcard (control)	Postcard 6: Vote as a koha + part translation	Postcard 2: Democracy appeal + gratitude	Postcard 5: Social norm - Māori + full translation	Postcard 3: Local issues	Postcard 1: Deciding vote + loss aversion
%	24.9%	24.8%	24.9%	25.0%	25.4%	25.7% †
n	n = 18,835	n = 12,360	n = 12,430	n = 12,319	n = 12,430	n = 12,428

† p < .1; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

2.2.3   Results by age and Māori descent

Further analysis shows a clear voting trend by age, where younger Aucklanders were less likely to vote than older Aucklanders.[14]

The postcard messages also appeared to have different effects depending on the age of recipient, such that postcard messages appeared to be generally more effective for older Aucklanders.

The analysis by age, seen in Figure 3 and Figure 4 for non-Māori and Māori respectively, shows a slightly negative impact of postcard messages for 18-30 year olds, an ambiguous impact of messages for 31-50 year olds, and a positive impact of messages for those ages 50+.

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[14] For more information on who did and did not vote across Auckland in the 2019 local elections see: https://knowledgeauckland.org.nz/publications/2019-auckland-local-election-voter-turnout-who-did-and-did-not-vote/

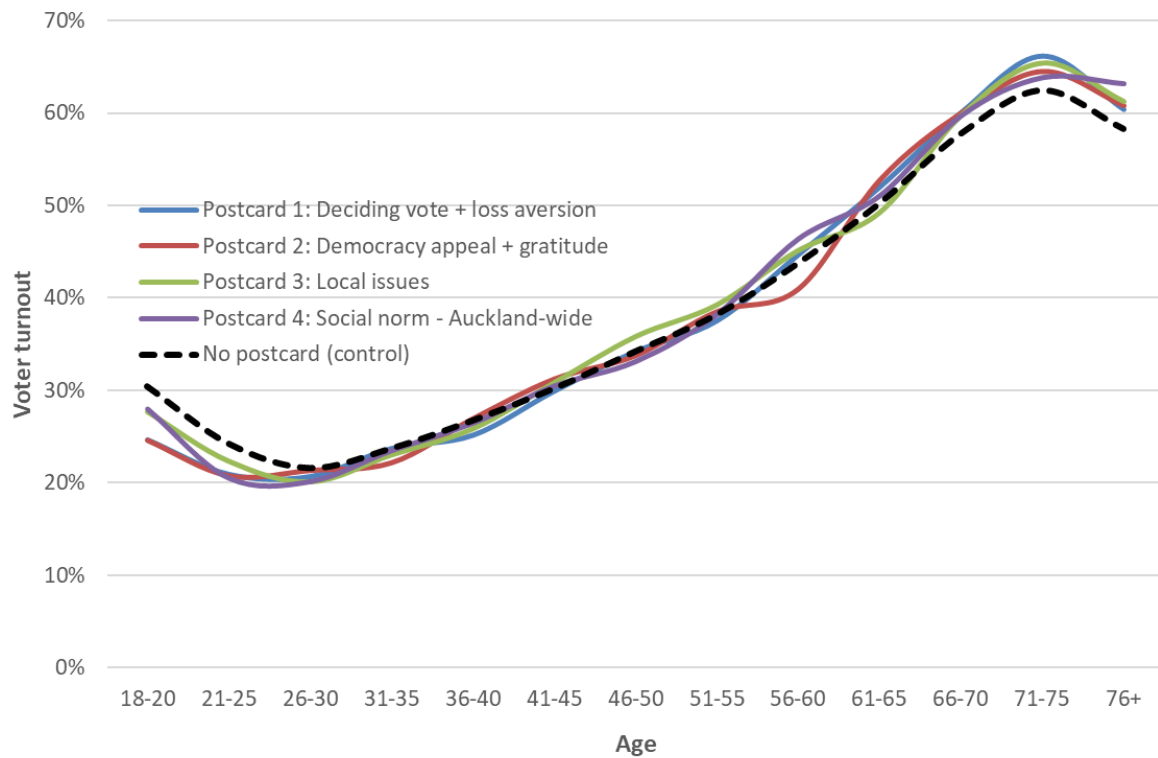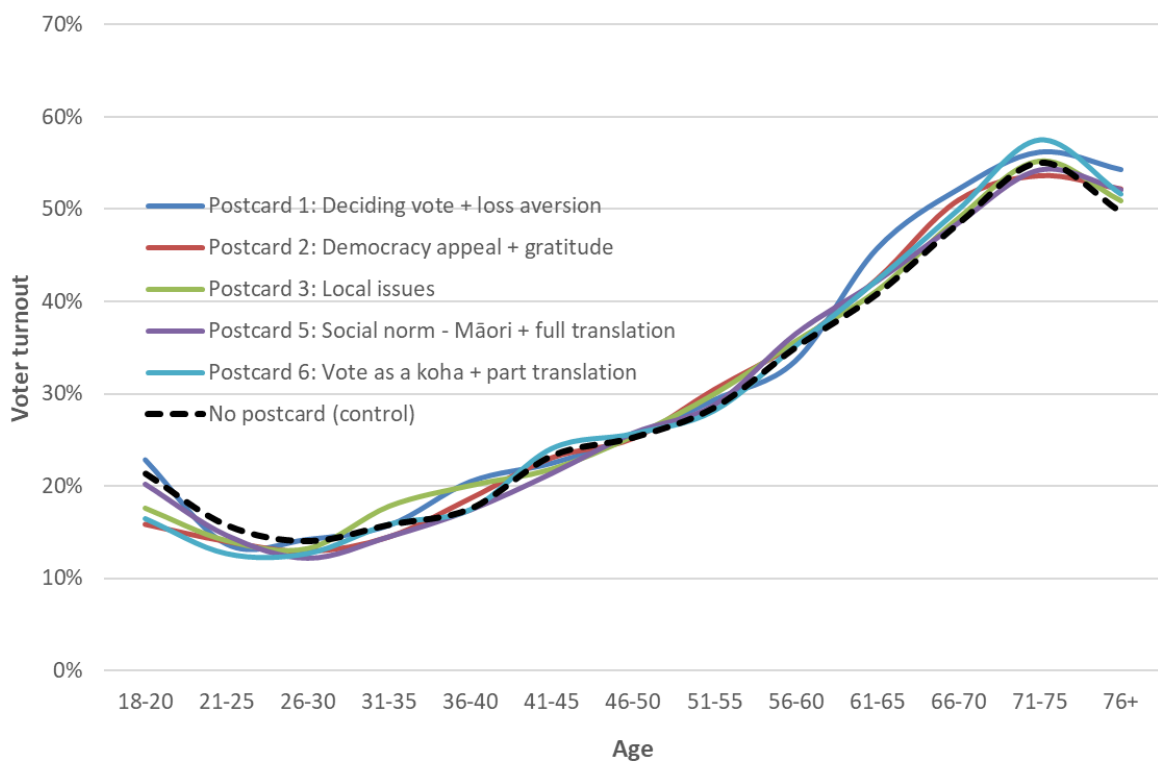Figure 3. Impact of different postcards on voter turnout for different age groups, non-Māori

Figure 4. Impact of different postcards on voter turnout for different age groups, Māori
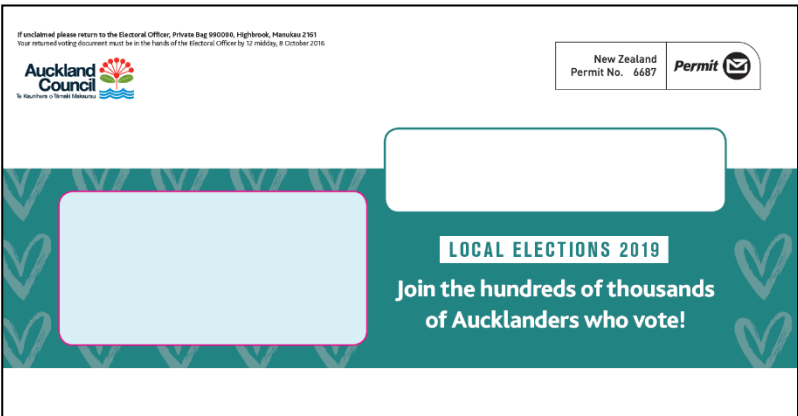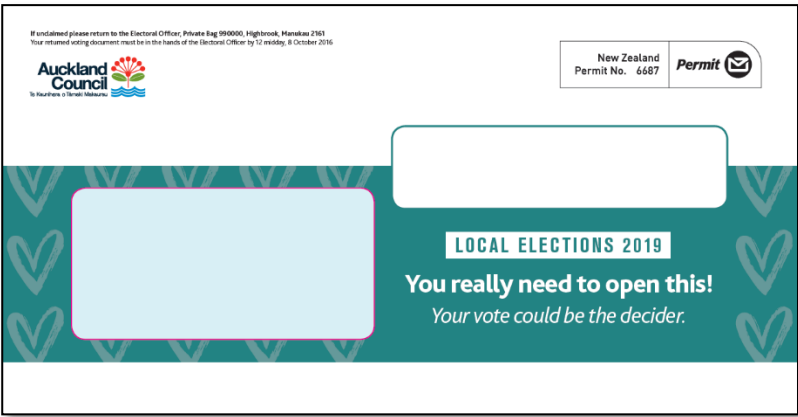
3.0   Messages on voting document envelopes

Messages were placed on both the outer envelope that was used to send electors their voting documents, and the FreePost return envelope provided for people to post their completed voting paper back.

Every individual received one of the two outer envelope designs and one of the two return envelope designs, as outlined in Table 2.
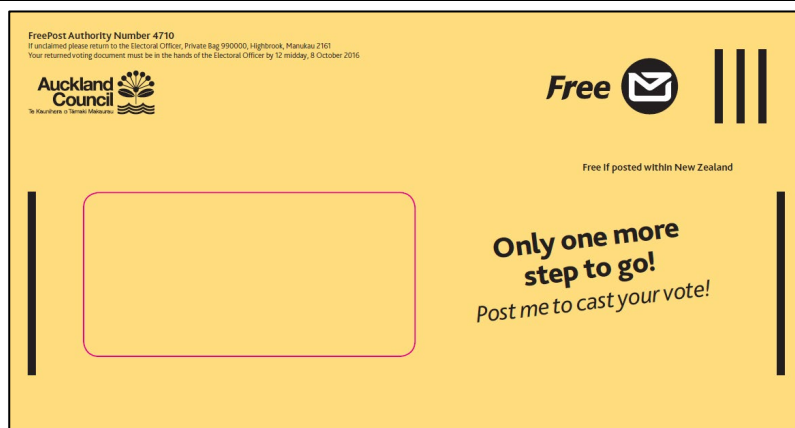
Table 2. Envelope messages

Outer envelope 1: Positive social norm message Highlighting the number of other Aucklanders who vote	
Outer envelope 2: 'Grab attention + deciding vote' Designed to pique attention and encouraged people to feel a sense of self-efficacy by highlighting that their vote could be the decider.	

Return envelope 1: 'Goal gradient effect' Encouraged people to cast their vote by drawing on the 'goal gradient effect' – the tendency to put more effort into completing a task as we get closer to its completion.	FreePost Authority Number 4710 If unclaimed please return to the Electoral Officer, Private Bag 990000, Highbrook, Manukau 2161 Your returned voting document must be in the hands of the Electoral Officer by 12 midday, 8 October 2016 **Auckland Council** Te Kaunihera o Tāmaki Makaurau **Free** ✉ ⦀ Free if posted within New Zealand **Only one more step to go!** *Post me to cast your vote!*
Return envelope 2: 'Memory hack' Offered a tangible memory technique to help people return their completed voting papers in the post.	FreePost Authority Number 4710 If unclaimed please return to the Electoral Officer, Private Bag 990000, Highbrook, Manukau 2161 Your returned voting document must be in the hands of the Electoral Officer by 12 midday, 8 October 2016 **Auckland Council** Te Kaunihera o Tāmaki Makaurau **Free** ✉ ⦀ Free if posted within New Zealand **Put me with your keys** *so you remember to post me!*

3.1   Design

Unlike for the postcard messages described in Section 2.0, we were unable to randomise individuals to receive messages (due to the bulk printing process required to produce 1+ million envelopes). As such, envelope messages were printed according to electoral area.

Each of the 25 electoral areas[15] received one of the four different envelope combinations:

- Outer envelope 1 and return envelope 1;
- Outer envelope 1 and return envelope 2;
- Outer envelope 2 and return envelope 1; or
- Outer envelope 2 and return envelope 2.

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[15] Reflecting 21 local board areas and four new 'hybrid' areas created by the 2019 Representation Review (https://governance.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/16-representation-and-reorganisation/representation-reviews/), where ward boundaries were changed for some residents.

Envelope messages were sent to different areas in a way that ensured each of the four possible envelope combinations were sent to similar numbers of electors and were matched in terms of voter turnout in the 2016 local elections.

3.2   Results

Because it was not possible to randomly select people to receive different envelope messages, the results are not so clear for the impact of messages on envelopes as they are for postcards.

Because every elector received two envelope messages (one on the outer envelope and one on the return envelope), we present results for the overall effect of each envelope message, as well as the effect of different combinations of messages. Given the differential responses of Māori and non-Māori to the postcard messages, we also investigate whether Māori and non-Māori respond differently to the envelope messages.

We were unable to assess the impact of different envelope messages using a randomised controlled trial and therefore cannot be certain that the envelope messages had a causal effect on turnout. Areas were matched based on both population and 2016 election turnout to ensure that all groups were as equivalent as possible.

3.2.1   Overall effects of each envelope message

There was a notable difference in voter turnout among the recipients of the two outer envelopes. Those who received their voting documents in outer envelope 1, with the social norm message, had voter turnout that was 5.9 per cent higher than those who received their documents in outer envelope 2 (35.7% and 33.7%, respectively).

The difference in turnout among those who received different return envelope messages was smaller. Electors who received return envelope 1, with a message highlighting they only have one more step to go, had slightly higher average turnout than those we received return envelope 2 with a the 'memory hack' (35.0% and 34.4%, respectively).

3.2.2   Results by age

Figure 5 shows that while turnout for both outer envelope messages was the same for those aged 45 or younger, the social norm message on outer envelope 1 was more impactful than outer envelope message 2 for those aged 46 and above. No clear age pattern was seen for the return envelope messages (see Figure 6).

Figure 5. Turnout for different outer envelope messages by age

Voter turnout

Outer envelope 1:
"Join the hundreds of thousands
of Aucklanders who vote!"

Outer envelope 2:
"You really need to open this!
Your vote could be the decider."

Age
18-20 21-25 26-30 31-35 36-40 41-45 46-50 51-55 56-60 61-65 66-70 71-75 76+
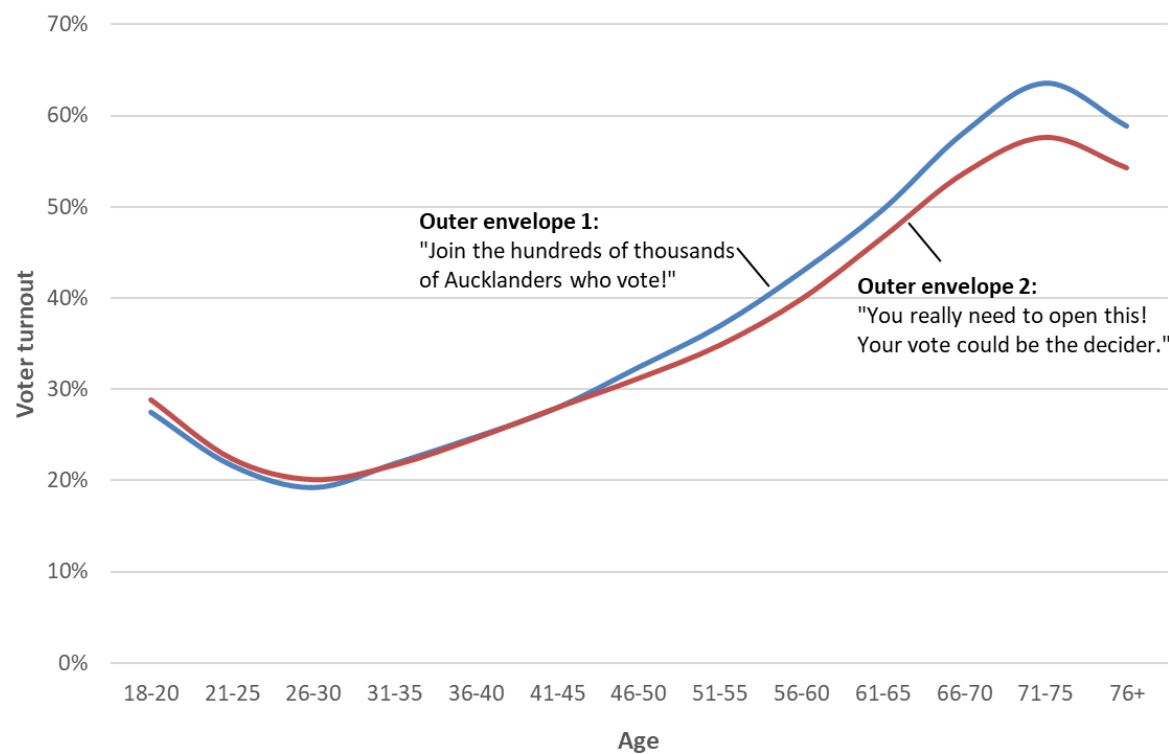
Figure 6. Turnout for different return envelope messages by age

Voter turnout

Return envelope 1:
"Only one more step to go!
Post me to cast your vote!"

Return envelope 2:
"Put me with your keys so
you remember to post me!"

Age
18-20 21-25 26-30 31-35 36-40 41-45 46-50 51-55 56-60 61-65 66-70 71-75 76+
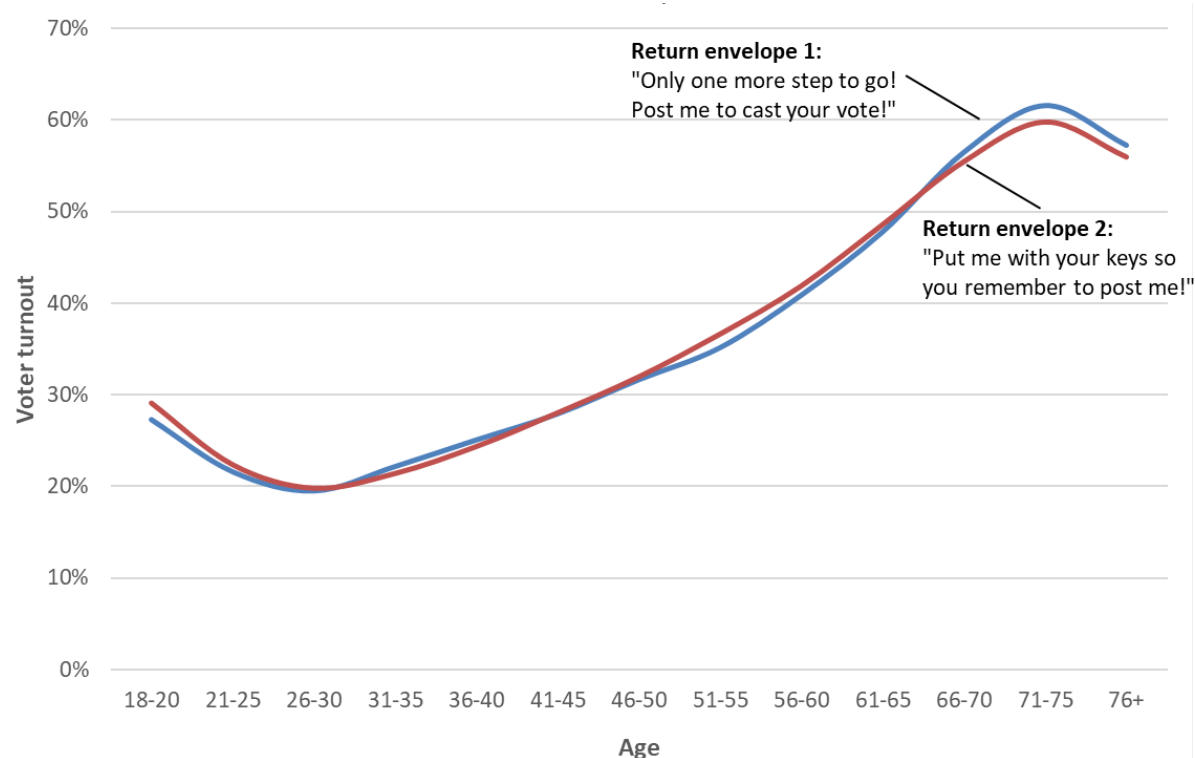
3.2.3 Interaction between outer envelope, inner envelope and Māori descent of recipient

We conducted a statistical test to determine whether a particular combination of outer and return envelope messages was related to higher voter turnout, and whether there were any differences between Māori and non-Māori in terms of which combination was more effective.[16]

The test showed that there was a statistically significant interaction between the outer envelope message, return envelope message and Māori descent status on voter turnout.[17] This interaction can be seen in Figure 7 and Figure 8.

For those who received the 'social norm' message on the outer envelope, the memory hack was the best combination for both Māori and non-Māori

For those who received the 'grab attention + deciding vote' outer envelope, however, the memory hack was better for Māori, but 'goal gradient' was best for non-Māori

Looking at the overall turnout for the different combinations, if one combination were to be chosen for future elections, the social norm outer envelope and memory hack inner envelope reflects the best trade-off in terms of different responses of non-Māori and Māori (as the first and second-best combination, respectively). This combination is highlighted with a red box in each figure below.

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[16] We did this by conducting a three-way ANOVA that examined the effect of outer envelope, return envelope and Māori descent of recipient on voter turnout behaviour.

[17] $F(1, 1063619) = 5.90$, $p < .05$

Figure 7. Turnout for different voting pack envelope combinations: **Non-Māori** electors
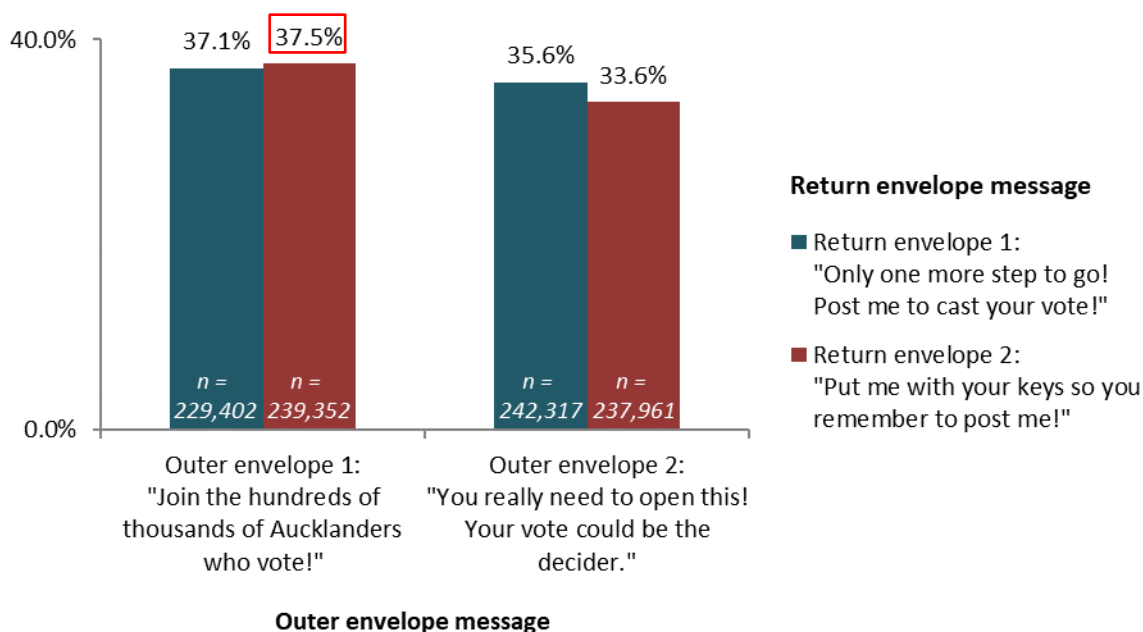
Note: The red highlight identifies the preferred combination for all of Auckland in future elections (as explained in the text)

Figure 8. Turnout for different voting pack envelope combinations: **Māori electors**
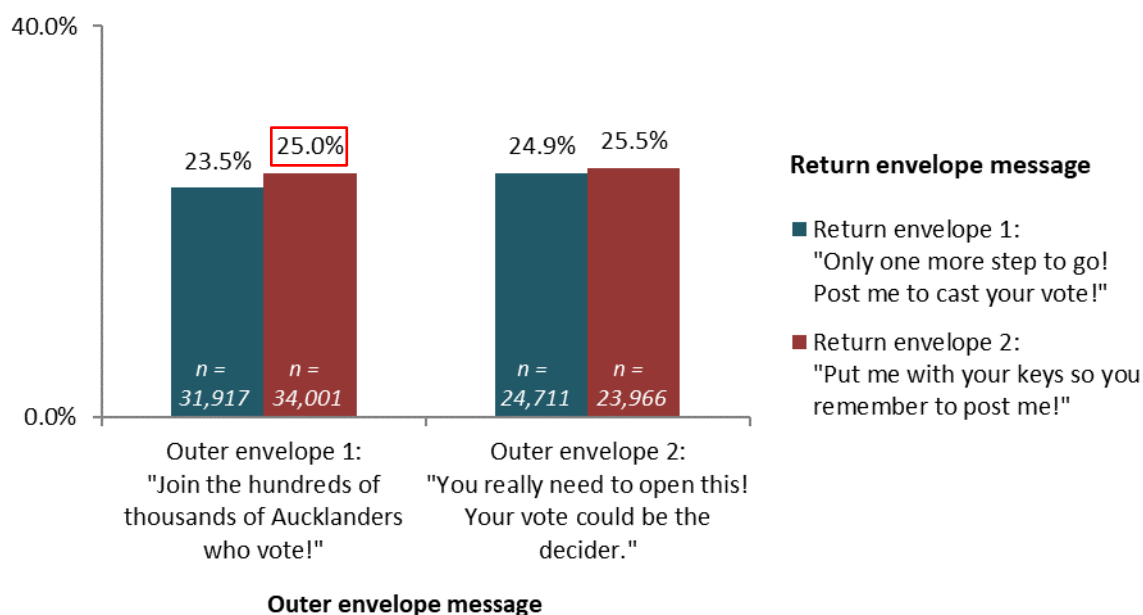
Note: The red highlight identifies the preferred combination for all of Auckland in future elections (as explained in the text)

4.0   Door-to-door canvassing

The third distinct component of this trial was door-to-door conversation, which was undertaken by pairs of people (for safety reasons). It was vital to use prepared scripts in order that messages were standardised. Two different and detailed canvassing scripts were developed, and each canvassing pair was assigned to use one of the two scripts.

Both scripts focused on asking people to commit verbally to vote in the upcoming elections and helping them plan when and where they were going to lodge their vote. However, one of the scripts also included an opportunity to discuss the issues that people care about (highlighted in purple below). The two scripts are shown in full in Appendix D.

4.1   Design

Neighbourhood areas were randomly selected to be canvassed. For selected neighbourhoods, an address within the area was then randomly selected to act as the starting address for canvassing. Once canvassers had started their shift at the starting address they followed specific rules (e.g. turn left, then right, then left etc.) to determine their route. The neighbourhoods in which canvassing occurred can be seen in Figure 9.

RockEnrol recruited, trained and supervised 20 canvassers, who worked in pairs. Half of these canvassers were Māori. Canvassers were provided with a list of addresses along with all registered electors' first names for each address. If they had a conversation with someone at the door, they were instructed to ask, naturally within the conversation (if possible), for the person's first name and to record this against the list of first names provided. This information, along with whether a conversation occurred, was recorded on a data record sheet that was subsequently entered electronically.

More detail on the sampling approach can be seen in Appendix C.

Figure 9. Areas canvassed in the lead up to the 2019 local elections

2019 Local Elections Canvassing Areas

Areas where canvassing was conducted

Potential canvassing areas where no canvassing was conducted

Areas deemed 'inaccessible' for door-to-door canvassing
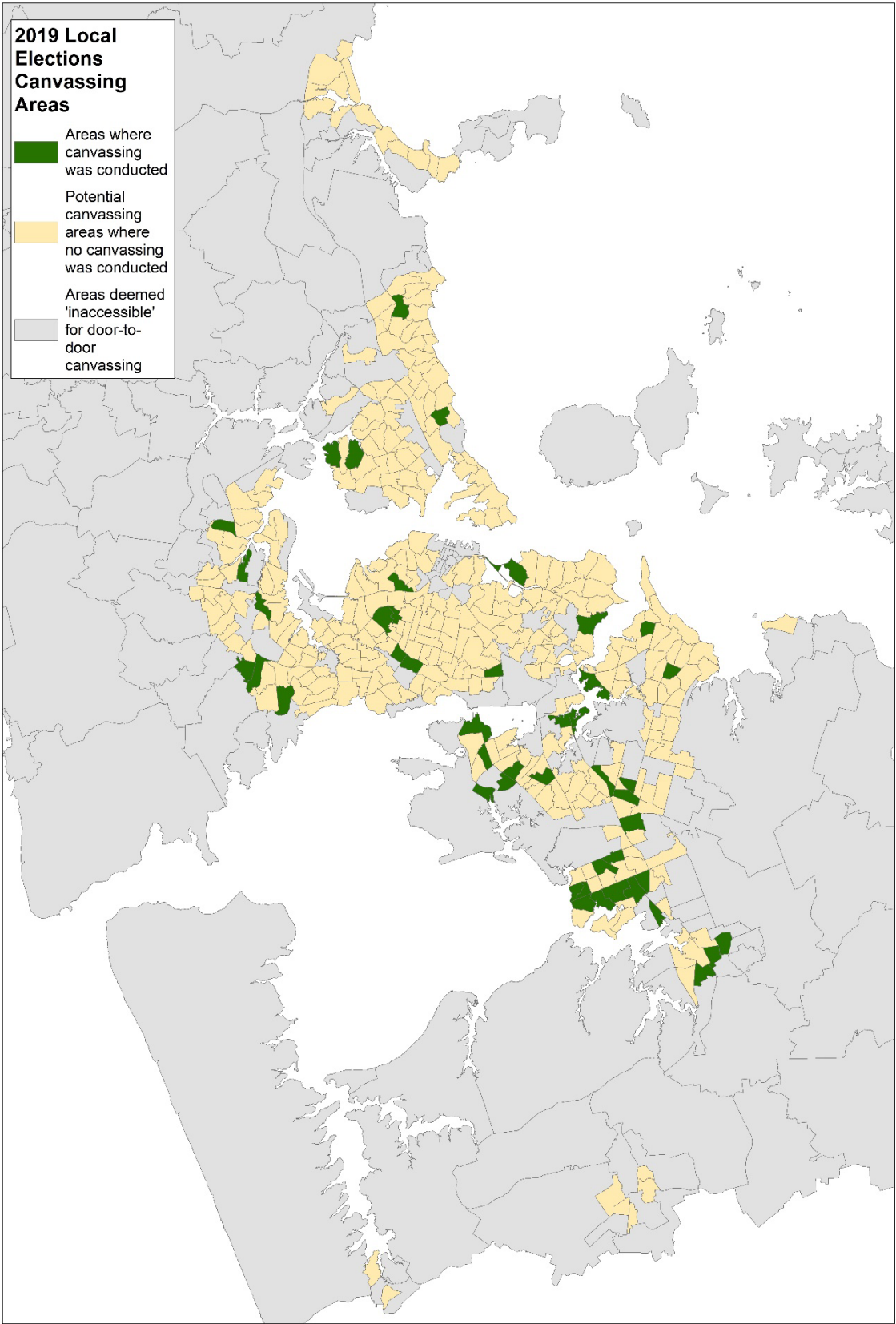
4.1.1 Limitations of the canvassing trial

There are several limitations to the canvassing that might temper the conclusions we draw.

Canvassing was contracted out to RockEnrol, an organisation with experience coordinating election canvassing activities. As canvassers were recruited without prior in-depth knowledge of local government and local elections it proved challenging to ensure all canvassers were well trained and knowledgeable prior to initiating canvassing.

Because of this, and because canvassers were not supervised at all times, we cannot be completely certain that canvassers followed their script and guidelines at all times.[18] Added to this, canvassers found it challenging to obtain names of the individuals who they spoke to in a natural way that flowed with the conversation. This means that while canvassers recorded details of whether they had a conversation or not at each address, we do not have full records of every individual canvassers spoke to (due to the interaction not lending itself to asking the person's name).

4.2   Results

We investigated the impact of canvassing on voter turnout by comparing, within SA2 areas where some canvassing was conducted, the turnout of residents who lived at addresses where canvassing was attempted with the turnout of residents who lived at addresses where no canvassing was conducted.

A number of comparisons were made for residents who lived at addresses where canvassing was attempted, splitting this group on the basis of whether a conversation occurred or not (the latter reflecting where canvassers knocked but no one answered, or were unable to enter the property due to dogs etc.), as well as looking at turnout for individuals who we can confirm had a conversation with a canvasser (who provided their first name, which matched the name of an elector registered at the address).

These comparisons were conducted for everyone overall, and for separately for Māori and non-Māori.

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[18] For example, one pair of canvassers were excluded from the analysis as they misunderstood instructions and spent all shifts in the same neighbourhood (SA2 area).

4.2.1 Overall effects of canvassing

Figure 10 below shows the turnout based on whether an individual lived in a household where canvassing was attempted or not, and if so, whether they or someone else in the household had a conversation.

Compared to individuals who lived in households where canvassing was not attempted:

- People who lived in a household where canvassing was attempted but no conversation occurred voted at a lower rate (-8.1% relative difference; -2.4 absolute percentage point difference), possibly reflecting a correlation between not being home (or not answering the door) and not voting.
- People who lived in a household where canvassing was attempted and a conversation occurred with someone in the household[19], voted at a slightly higher rate (+2.3% relative difference; +0.7 absolute percentage point difference).
- Individuals who we can identify as having had a conversation with a canvasser (by asking their name and matching this name to the electoral roll) voted at a notably higher rate (+26.8% relative difference; +7.9 absolute percentage point difference).

All three comparisons with households where canvassing was not attempted were statistically significant.[20]

Figure 10. Overall effect of canvassing on voter turnout (both canvassing scripts combined)

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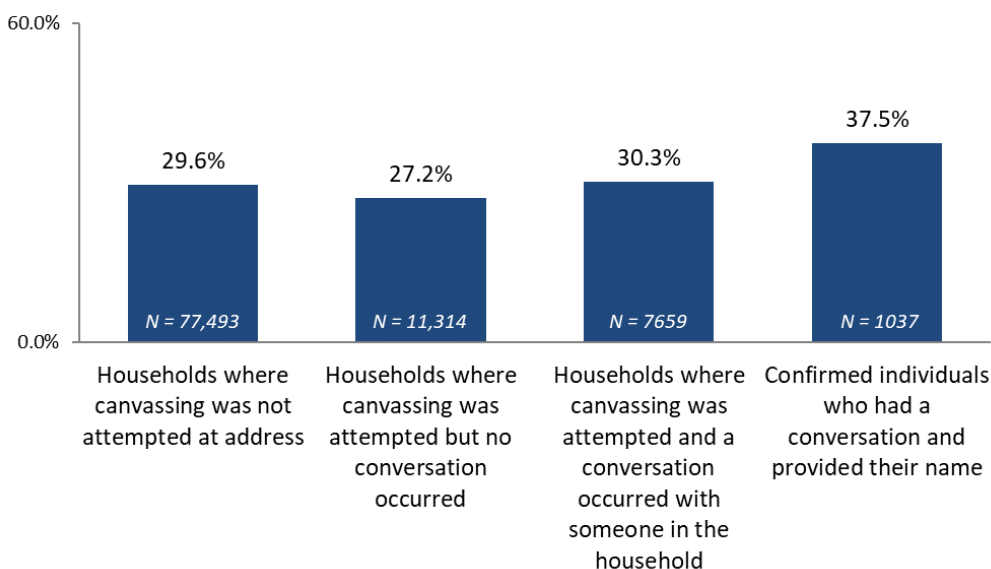
[19] Note, this statistic includes people who live at an address where someone else had the conversation with a canvasser, even if they themselves were not part of the conversation.
[20] Using a chi-square test of independence, all ps < .00001

Figure 11 breaks these overall findings down by canvassing script type. Script 1 – which focused on seeking a verbal commitment from the person that they were going to vote, and providing information and encouragement to help them do so – seems to have been much more effective than script 2, which focused on asking people about the issues they care about.

Amongst those who we can identify as having had a conversation with a canvasser, turnout was 56.4 per cent for script 1 and 30.2 per cent for script 2.

Figure 11. Overall effect of canvassing on voter turnout (canvassing scripts reported separately)
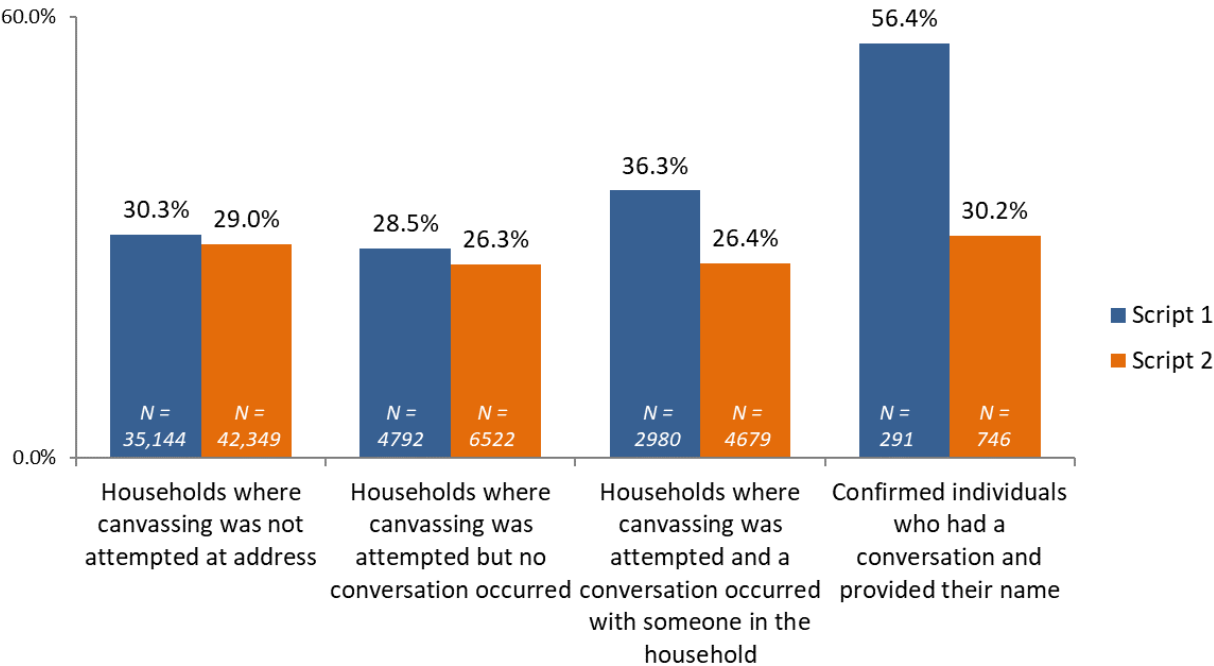
4.2.2 Effects of canvassing for Māori and non-Māori

Canvassing results were also examined for Māori and non-Māori separately. The overall results can be seen in Figure 12.

Figure 12. Effect of canvassing on voter turnout by Māori descent (both canvassing scripts combined)

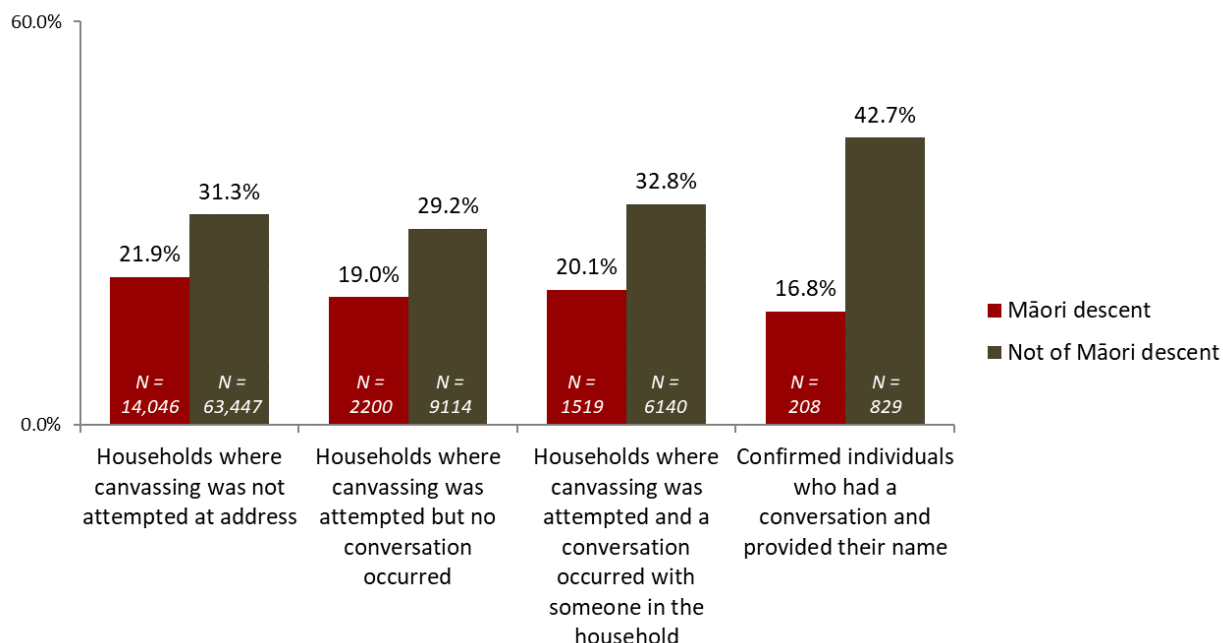The results show that compared to individuals who lived in households where canvassing wasn't attempted:

- Individuals who lived in a household where canvassing was attempted but no conversation occurred voted at a lower rate, possibly reflecting a correlation between not being home (or not answering the door) and not voting. A similar pattern was seen for both non-Māori (-6.7% relative difference; -2.1 absolute percentage point difference) and Māori (-13.4% relative difference; -2.9 absolute percentage point difference).

- Non-Māori individuals who lived in a household where canvassing was attempted and a conversation occurred with someone in the household, voted at a higher rate (+4.8% relative difference; +1.5 absolute percentage point difference), whereas Māori living in such houses voted at a lower rate (-8.5% relative difference; -1.9 absolute percentage point difference).

- Non-Māori individuals who we can identify as having had a conversation with a canvasser (by asking their name) voted at a notably higher rate (+36.5% relative difference; +11.4 absolute percentage point difference), whereas Māori individuals who had a confirmed conversation voted at a notably lower rate -23.3% relative difference; -5.1 absolute percentage point difference).
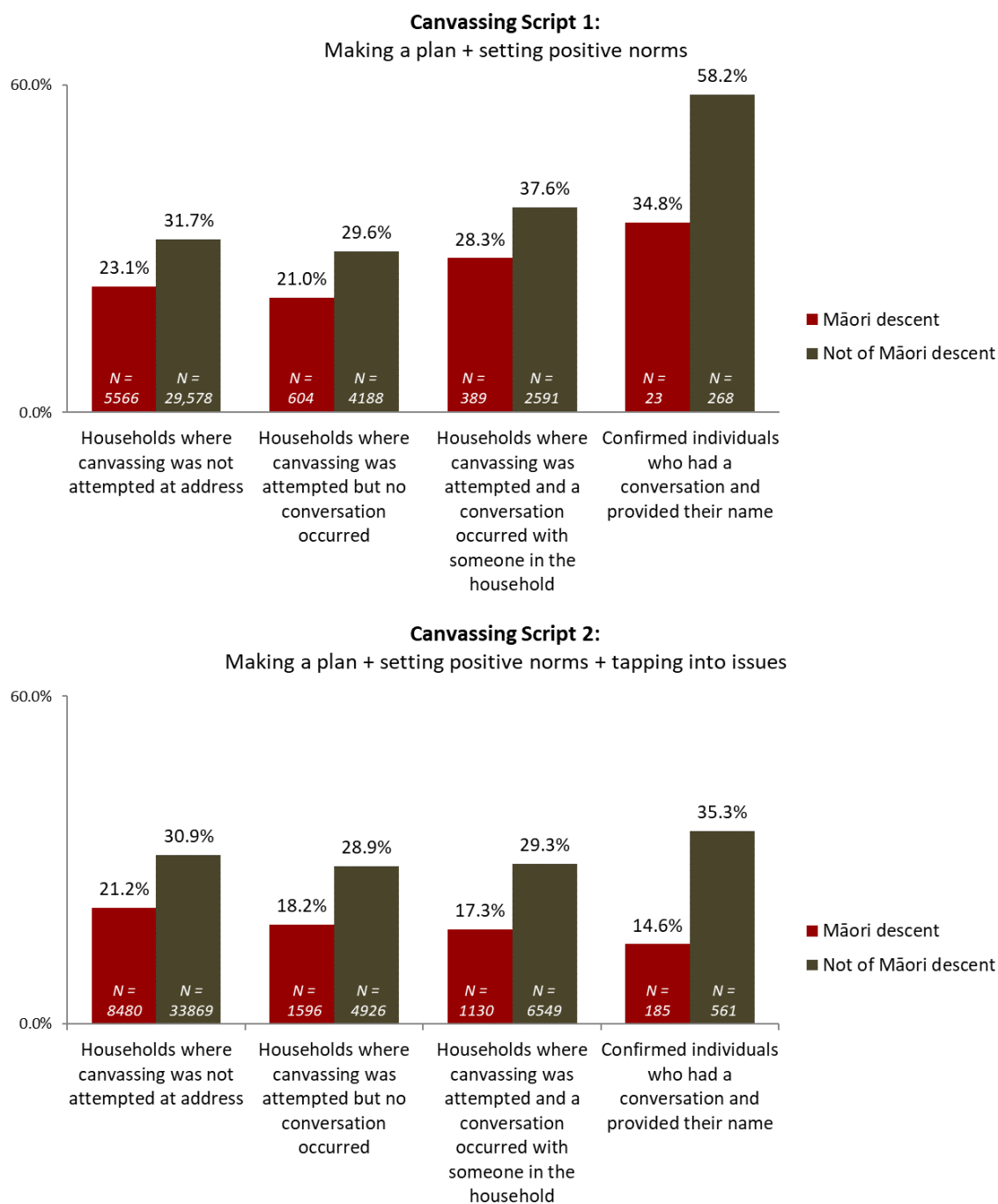
All comparisons with households where canvassing was not attempted were statistically significant.[21]

Further breaking down the analysis by script type shows a similar pattern as identified overall. Script 1 conversations appeared to have a strong positive effect on both Māori and non-Māori, whereas a script 2 conversation had a mildly positive impact on non-Māori and a negative impact on Māori. Note that the sample size for Māori and script 1 is relatively low, so these findings should be interpreted with caution.

As with the overall results, statistical analysis for each script type separately showed that all three comparisons with households where canvassing wasn't attempted were significant, and that the nature of these differences varied for Māori and non-Māori (all ps < .0001).

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[21] Multiple log-linear analyses (similar to a chi-square test of independence) were conducted to test the whether the differences identified in each of the Section 4.2.2 bullet points were statistically significant. The tests showed significant three-way interactions for each comparison, indicating that the comparisons with households where canvassing wasn't attempted were significant, and that the nature of these differences varied for Māori and non-Māori (all ps < .0001).

Figure 13. Effect of canvassing on voter turnout by Māori descent (canvassing scripts reported separately)

Canvassing Script 1:
Making a plan + setting positive norms

Canvassing Script 2:
Making a plan + setting positive norms + tapping into issues

5.0 Discussion

Although this trial did not test all possible election-related messages and communication channels (e.g. social media channels), it provides good evidence for the type of messages that resonate with Aucklanders and affect voter turnout.

This information will be of particular use to Auckland Council, as well as other councils across New Zealand, as they seek to increase engagement with local elections. The knowledge generated from this research also provides a foundation for future trials of other ways of increasing voter turnout

5.1 The most effective messages and approaches

5.1.1 Social norms

The trial found clear evidence for an effect of positive social norm messages on voting. For non-Māori, receiving one simple social norm message on a postcard stating that "74% of Aucklanders are planning on voting. Join them and vote this election" increased turnout 4.1 per cent (an absolute increase of 1.6 percentage points).

Electors who received their voting paper with a social norm message encouraging them to "join the hundreds of thousands of Aucklanders to vote" had 5.9 per cent higher turnout (an absolute difference of two percentage points) than those receiving the non-norm message.

Social norm messages appear to have had less effect among Māori electors. The Māori-specific social norm postcard message had no significant impact on voter turnout. Because we included a full reo Māori translation of this message, and placed this message first on the postcard, it is not clear whether the lack of impact of this message was due to the norm message, or the reo Māori translation, or both. Similarly, the envelope social norm message was less clearly impactful for Māori, but was reasonably effective when combined with a 'memory hack' (return envelope 2) message.

5.1.2 Highlighting local issues

Highlighting the influence of Auckland Council over important local issues (such as public transport, parks and playgrounds, roads, and water quality), and encouraging people to vote if they care about those issues, increased turnout for non-Māori by 3.7 per cent (an absolute difference of 1.4 percentage points).

One of the canvassing scripts focused on eliciting a discussion with electors about the issues they care about. This appeared to have only a small positive impact on non-Māori and a highly

negative impact on Māori. Although the results are not conclusive on the impact of the scripts specifically, it is possible that the implementation of the concept in the specific canvassing script was awkward and unnatural (see Appendix D to read the scripts).

5.1.3 Your vote could be the decider

Reminding people that their vote could be the decider between a candidate who represents their views and one who does not, and not to let someone else decide for them, had a positive impact for both Māori and non-Māori. This message increased turnout by 3.2 per cent and 2.8 per cent for Māori and non-Māori, respectively (reflecting absolute differences of 0.8 percentage points and 1.0 percentage points).

5.1.4 Democracy appeal and gratitude

Appealing to people's sense of civic duty by noting that democracy depends on people like them voting, and thanking them for doing so, increased turnout amongst non-Māori recipients by 3.3 per cent (an absolute difference of 1.2 percentage points). This message had no significant effect on Māori.

5.1.5 Canvassing conversations

Having an in-person conversation with electors has the potential to have strong positive impacts, however the content of the conversation appears to matter.

People who were identified as having had a conversation with a canvasser voted at a notably higher rate than those who lived in a house where no canvassing occurred (+26.8% relative difference). Much of these impacts were a result of the simpler script 1 (for which those talked to had turnout that was 85.9% higher than those who lived in a house in the same neighbourhood that was not canvassed). There was very little overall impact of script 2, possibly because it resulted in an unnatural conversation.

There also appear to be some important differences between those of Māori descent and those not of Māori descent. Script 1 resulted in positive impacts for both groups, whereas script 2 had mildly positive impacts on non-Māori and quite negative impacts on Māori. The differences seen between Māori and non-Māori need further investigation.

5.2 Finding ways to engage Māori

A major focus of the trial was on identifying effective ways of encouraging Māori to vote. Māori-specific messages were developed, reo Māori was used, and Māori individuals were recruited to deliver the canvassing.

Unfortunately, the results show that not much of what we tried worked.

The only message amongst those we tested that appeared to resonate with Māori was that which highlighted their vote could be the decider between a candidate that represents them and one that doesn't, and not to let someone else decide for them. This message increased turnout by 0.8 percentage points, a difference that was marginally significant in statistical terms.

There is no evidence that other messages had an impact, including framing voting as a koha, a Māori-specific social norm message, gratitude and an appeal to democracy. Reo Māori translations also did not appear to have any detectable effect, or possibly had positive effects on some recipients and negative effects on others (e.g. those who are not fluent in reo Māori) which cancelled one another out.

The general lack of response to postcard messages might also reflect a lower effectiveness of postcards as a communication channel for Māori. It is in part for this reason that we tested in-person canvassing.

In-person canvassing produced conflicting results for Māori electors. Although script 1 appeared to have positive impacts on those spoken to as well as their housemates, script 2 had notably negative impacts. Relatively small sample sizes for Māori across the two scripts make it difficult to draw strong conclusions, however the results indicate that while engaging kanohi ki te kanohi (face to face) may have positive impacts, how it is done is crucially important.

It is important to acknowledge also that the issue of Māori voter turnout goes well beyond message content and likely speaks to longer-standing systemic issues around engagement and representation in local and central government. Histories of disenfranchisement as a result of colonisation and resultant inequalities that persist today may mean that Māori, on average, are less likely to trust and participate in the mainstream political system.[22]

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[22] For example, see McVey, A., and Vowles, J. (2005). Virtuous Circle or Cul de Sac? Social Capital and Political Participation in New Zealand. *Political Science*, 57(1), 5-20.

5.3 Finding ways to engage young people

The research revealed a strong relationship between age and voting. Not only did older Aucklanders vote at much higher rates, the postcard and envelope messages we tested also appeared to be more impactful in amongst older Aucklanders.

As with Māori, there is therefore a need to develop more effective ways of engaging young Aucklanders. As noted in Section 1.2, the characteristics of the messenger play an important role in the impact of the message, such that messengers that are respected members of one's own group are more effective. It is possible that the way most of the messages were delivered (postcards and envelopes, with council branding) did not connect with young voters and led to the messages being ignored.

It is possible that the messages would be more impactful if delivered by messengers that young Aucklanders relate to. It is also possible that the messages themselves were ineffective, and alternative approaches are required.

5.4 Recommendations for future campaigns

Several recommendations for future campaigns are outlined below.

5.4.1 Highlight positive social norms in relation to voting

Our trial of positive social norm messages – simply telling people what others are doing or planning on doing, via a postcard or on voting documents – had the strongest impact on voter turnout out of the messages we tested. This effect was seen most strongly for those aged 40 and over, however, indicating that more specific normative messages might be required for younger Aucklanders.

The impact we did see for social norm messages is nevertheless consistent with a sizable body of international research that shows people are influenced by social norm messages, often more than they anticipate.[23]

Positive social norm messages should therefore be used where possible to encourage people to vote. It is important that such messages are *positive* however, focusing on instances where the majority are planning to vote or emphasising how many people vote.

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[23] McDonald, R.I. and C.S. Crandall (2015). Social norms and social influence, *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences, 3*, 147-151.

The importance of ensuring normative messages are positive is because people are equally affected by negative norms (i.e. information that many people are doing an undesirable thing). Considering the current low voter turnout in local elections, emphasising this fact is likely to further **decrease** voter turnout. Councils therefore need to consider this when delivering messages regarding the problem of low voter turnout, lest they inadvertently contribute to further decline.

Up to this point we have discussed only descriptive social norms – factual descriptions of what others are doing or planning on doing. Where the descriptive social norm is negative (and thus likely to encourage an undesirable behaviour), other normative messages, such as 'injunctive' and 'trending' social norms may still be effective at promoting desired behaviour.

An injunctive social norm highlights what the majority of people value and feel is the appropriate behaviour (e.g. "most Aucklanders think voting in local elections is important"); a trending social norm is focused on the growth in people performing a behaviour (reflecting the potential start of a social movement), even if the total number of people is still relatively low (e.g. "an increasing number of young people are voting in local elections, join them and vote"). Both can be used to positively influence behaviour where the descriptive norm is negative.

5.4.2   Encourage social groups to vote

Voting is an inherently social activity; it reflects a collective decision about who is to govern and decide the direction of society. As discussed, positive social norm messages can have a powerful effect on whether people choose to vote, and evidence suggests that other forms of social influence are also likely to be impactful.

One such mechanism is known as a 'network nudge', where individuals are encouraged to encourage others in their social networks to do something. One way network nudging has been used to encourage voter turnout is by 'vote tripling', where an individual is asked to make a commitment to encourage three people they know to vote.[24] The technique draws on the power of peer influence, and encourages people to follow through by making a written commitment to nudge their friends. A text message is often sent to people to remind them to nudge the three people in their network. An example of a 'vote tripler' commitment card can be seen in Figure 14 below.

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[24] Green, D., and Gerber, A. (2015). *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout.* Brookings Institution Press.

Figure 14. The front and back of a sample 'vote tripler' sign-up card

5.4.3 Make voting a more publicly visible activity

Previous research shows that voter turnout is higher when the activity of voting is made publicly visible. For example, studies have found that social pressure exerted through publishing who did and did not vote in a given area increased turnout by up to 8.1 percentage points.[25] Such approaches increase public accountability and social pressure to vote, but may result in negative reactions if implemented in a way that feels like a violation of privacy.

There are other ways to make voting more publicly visible that would contribute to building social accountability and positive social norms without the negative effects of publicly publishing who did and did not vote. These include:

- Providing a highly visible public mechanism for people to indicate that they have voted (e.g. sharing on social media, providing visible items to be worn or displayed once voted), and creating the social conditions where people are motivated to display that they have voted.
- Creating highly visible voting booths or vote deposit areas that people see in the course of their daily life.

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[25] Gerber, A.S., D.P. Green and C.W. Larimer. (2008) Social pressure and voter turnout: evidence from a largescale field experiment. *American Political Science Review, 102,* 33-48.

5.4.4 Make voting more relevant by focusing on tangible issues

Many Aucklanders are not aware of the breadth of activities that Auckland Council undertakes that impact on their daily life. For such individuals, not voting in local elections makes sense: why spend the time and energy trying to navigate voting documents and select desired candidates when there is no relevance to their day-to-day life?

While the remit of local government is not as broad as central government (which is responsible for taxation, education, health and other policy settings), the policies, bylaws and regulations set by local government have a significant impact on things people care about.

More compelling communication of the impact of local government on public transport, roads and parking; city design; zoning; parks, playgrounds and sports fields; and the natural environment is likely to increase voter turnout.

5.4.5 Make voting easier

Although we did not assess the impact of making the voting process easier in this trial, the behavioural science is clear that all else being equal, people are more likely to complete a task when it is easy to do.[26]

For many Aucklanders, multiple aspects of voting in local elections may be difficult, including:
- Understanding how the system works (e.g. what the mayor, ward councillors, local board members do).
- Determining which candidates represent their views (often only from limited information contained in 150-word candidate profile statements).
- Navigating the voting documents and candidate information booklet.
- Working out how to return their completed voting papers.

Without strong motivation to vote (e.g. from positive social pressure or a clear connection between voting and one's personal life), the friction and frustration experienced at the steps above are likely to dissuade a significant portion of electors from following through on their intentions to vote.

There are multiple ways to make voting easier, including both immediate (e.g. redesigning voting documents) and long-term solution (e.g. increased civic education in schools focused on helping people understand local democracy, online voting that makes finding the preferred candidate easier).

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[26] The Behavioural Insights Team. (2014). EAST: four simple ways to apply behavioural insights. http://www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/BIT-Publication-EAST_FA_WEB.pdf

One area where significant improvements are suggested is ensuring that electors can identify the candidates in their local area who they feel best represents their interests. Currently, unless one follows local politics avidly, there is no easy way to do this. The current candidate profile statements are limited (by regulation) to 150 words, and while some councils attempt to supplement this by asking candidates their policy positions on custom election websites[27], not all candidates take up this service.

This is supported by research into non-voters that showed 84 per cent did not know what Auckland Council does, and many reported they did not vote in the last local election because they didn't know anything about the candidates (29%), didn't know enough about the policies (23%), couldn't work out who to vote for (15%), and/or didn't know enough about council or why they should vote (13%).[28]

5.4.5.1 Ways to make it easier for people to choose candidates

Councils would benefit from making it easier for potential voters to select their preferred candidates.

The German Wahl-O-Mat represents one solution to this problem. It asks potential voters whether they agree or disagree with a number of statements about topical issues (e.g. "the harbour should be dredged to allow more shipping vessels"). It then matches voters with the candidates (or parties) that most closely match their responses (with the ability to weight the matching based on the most important issues to people). It provides a simple and intuitive way to determine who best represents your views on important issues.

In 2013, when Wahl-O-Mat was launched, approximately 13.2 million people used it (15% of the German population) and there is evidence it increased interest, expertise and turnout amongst those who don't normally vote.

> *In a study, Stefan Marschall, professor of political science at the University of Düsseldorf, examined whether the use of online voting aids has an impact on expertise, interest in the election, and voter turnout. The answer to all three questions was yes. In particular, the Bundeszentrale's express goal of motivating people to vote seems to achieve this. The political scientist estimates that between six and nine percent of users voted after trying the Wahl-O-Mat - even though they had not previously planned to do so.[29]*

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[27] Such as Auckland Council's 2019 www.voteauckland.co.nz website.

[28] Smith Business Consulting (2019). *Understanding opportunities for increasing voter participation in the Auckland local elections*. Report prepared for Auckland Council.

[29] https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/wahl-o-mat-wie-der-wahl-o-mat-auf-das-wahlverhalten-wirkt/20270062.html

If such a system were implemented for local elections in New Zealand, it would need to be centrally administered by an impartial and transparent body (such as the Electoral Commission), and all candidates would need to be required to participate.

5.4.6   Use the 'social norm' and 'memory hack' messages on voter document envelopes

Our analysis in Section 3.2.3 shows that the optimal combination of envelope messages for both Māori and non-Māori Aucklanders is the 'social norm' message on the outer envelope ("Join the hundreds of thousands of Aucklanders who vote!") paired with the 'memory hack' message on the FreePost return envelope ("Put me with your keys so you remember to post me!").

Future campaigns may decide to further improve upon these messages, however if this is not done, we recommend using the messages above on all envelopes.

5.5   Limitations

Although this research represents a significant step toward understanding what works to encourage voter turnout, there is much work to be done.

One limitation of the research presented here relates to the channels by which the messages were delivered. In order to conduct a robust trial, we had to be sure the messages reached their intended recipient. In order to do this we needed to deliver those messages to their physical address (by either post, or door-to-door conversations). As a result, we were unable to test engagement via other channels, such as TV, radio and social media.

While this is a limitation of the study, we would expect the messages that were the most effective via postcard to also be most effective via other communication channels. The trial findings should therefore still be used in future communications campaigns involving multiple channels.

The trial also didn't test all possible messages or approaches to increasing voter turnout. It is possible that other behavioural interventions, such as systematically making voting easier (both selecting candidates and casting one's vote), might have more notable effects on turnout. This study provides a template for future testing of messages.

5.6   Future research

This work has demonstrated the value and feasibility of running large-scale field trials to understand what does and does not work. The results provide a strong indication of which messages and approaches have a positive impact on Aucklanders' engagement with local elections.

Future research may investigate ways to improve upon the messages that worked in 2019, or to develop and test alternative messages that resonate with Aucklanders. This is particularly important for Māori Aucklanders, as most of the messages and approaches we trialled did not have a notable impact on turnout.

As a result of the trial we also were able to produce statistics on who did and did not vote across all of Auckland in terms of age, Māori descent, local area and gender.[30] Conducting research using the electoral roll next election may be necessary to produce these statistics again.

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[30] This report can be found here: https://knowledgeauckland.org.nz/publications/2019-auckland-local-election-voter-turnout-who-did-and-did-not-vote/

6.0   Conclusion

This is the first large-scale behavioural insights trial in New Zealand local government elections and provides new evidence of what approaches and messages encourage New Zealanders to vote.

While many of the effects are moderate in size, they are proportional to the scale of the interventions tested (e.g. single postcard messages). The robust research design enables us to claim with some confidence which messages worked, and which did not.

When scaled across whole elections campaigns, the messages and concepts proven here have the potential to have significantly larger effects. They also provide a new baseline against which to test other ways of increasing voter turnout.

7.0 Appendix A: Tracking results against voter turnout and measuring the causal impact on voter behaviour

The trial was able to link the three components to actual (anonymised) voter turnout behaviour, using the Electoral Roll. Prior to the 2019 election, RIMU applied to the Electoral Commission for access to the Electoral Roll for research purposes. The Electoral Commission provided a list of every elector in Auckland, along with their title, name, age, and Māori descent status. This information was then used to randomly assign electors, or neighbourhood areas, to receive postcards or canvassing, respectively.

Information on whether an individual received a postcard, had a canvassing conversation, and which envelopes they received was recorded against their name. After the election, this information was provided to Independent Election Services, who matched it with their records of whether or not an individual had voted. They then stripped out all identifying information from the dataset and provided an anonymised dataset back to RIMU, enabling the calculation of turnout for recipients of different messages. The process is outlined visually in the image below.

Figure 15. How the trial tracked actual voter turnout
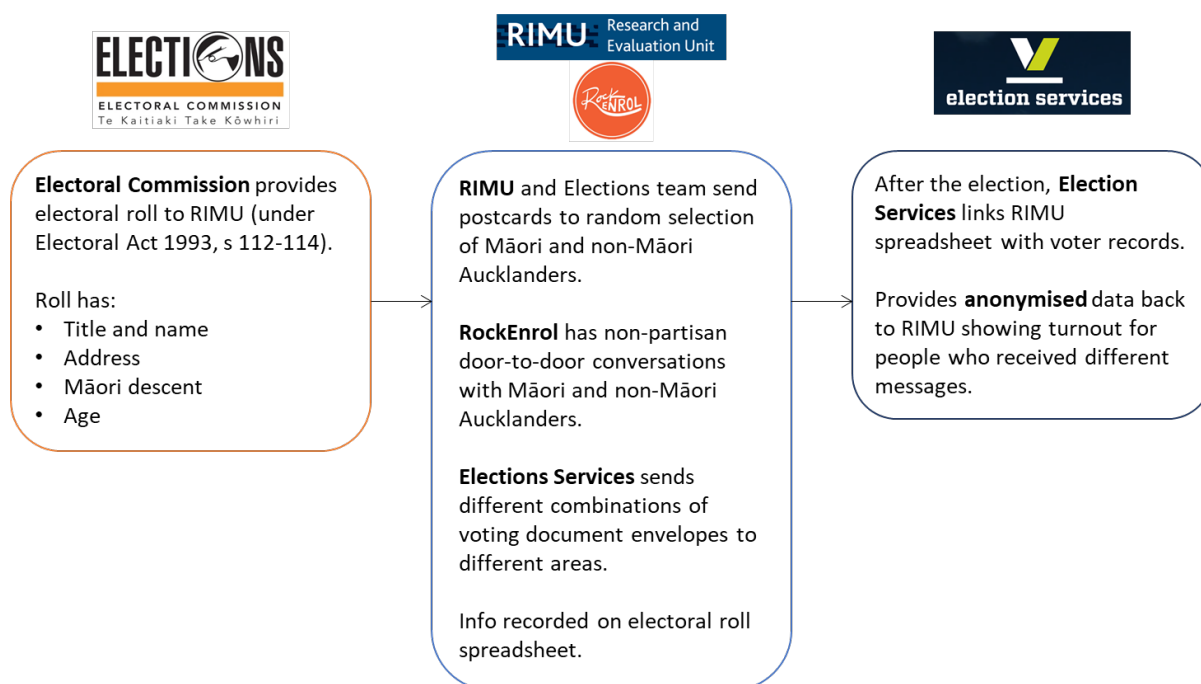
This is the first time a local authority in New Zealand has obtained a dataset containing voter turnout by age, Māori descent status, and neighbourhood location. As such, a separate short report has been produced summarising who did and did not vote across Auckland, in terms of these demographic variables.[31]

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[31] https://www.knowledgeauckland.org.nz/publications/2019-auckland-local-election-voter-turnout-who-did-and-did-not-vote/

For the purposes of this report, 'Māori' is used as shorthand for electors who indicated they were of Māori descent when enrolling to vote, and 'non-Māori' as shorthand for those who indicated they were not of Māori descent.

Establishing a causal impact on voter behaviour

This ability to track actual voter records, along with the use of robust randomised controlled trial (RCT) experimental designs when testing different postcards and door-to-door canvassing, allows us to draw conclusions as to the causal impact of these different approaches on voter behaviour.

RCTs are an established way to understand cause and effect. The principle of an RCT is to randomly assign people to receive either an intervention or no intervention, and then to compare subsequent outcomes between the groups. The randomisation effectively cancels out any pre-existing differences between the groups due to individual variability in attitudes, life stages etc. and gives us confidence that any subsequent differences between groups are due to the intervention and not something else that was unanticipated. The figure below provides a visual representation of how an RCT works.

Figure 16. Illustration of a randomised controlled trial (RCT) to test a 'back to work' programme
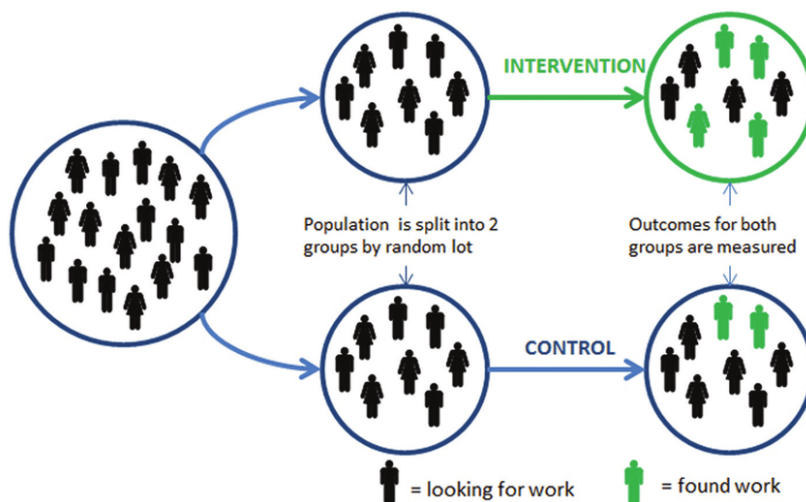
Source: Haynes, L., Goldacre, B., and Torgerson, D. (2012). Test, learn, adapt: developing public policy with randomized controlled trials. Cabinet Office Behavioural Insights Team.

8.0 Appendix B: Postcard trial design

The postcard sampling involved the following steps:
- The electoral roll was split into two separate lists, based on whether an elector lived in a 'Māori household' or not (defined as an address with one or more Māori electors living there).
- For each list, households were randomly assigned to receive one of the possible postcards (one of five versions for Māori households, or one of four versions for non-Māori households) or to act as a control household (where no one at the address received a postcard).
    - To avoid exceeding our printing budget, the number of households to receive each of the postcard versions was capped at 12,430 for Māori households and 16,963 for non-Māori households (reflecting a total budget for 130,000 postcards).
- For each household that was assigned a postcard, one individual within the household was randomly selected to be the named recipient.
    - For postcards assigned to Māori households, the only Māori electors were included in the random selection of individuals.

This sampling approach meant that no more than one postcard was sent per household. The number of recipients for each postcard version can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Number of postcards sent to Māori and non-Māori electors

Postcard version	Number sent to Māori electors	Number sent to non-Māori electors	Total
Postcard 1: 'Deciding vote + loss aversion'.	12,428	16,963	29,393
Postcard 2: 'Democracy appeal + gratitude'	12,430	16,963	29,391
Postcard 3: 'Local issues'	12,430	16,963	29,393
Postcard 4: 'Social norm – Auckland-wide'	0	16,963	16,963
Postcard 5: 'Social norm – Māori specific + full reo Māori translation'	12,319	0	12,319
Postcard 6: 'Vote as a koha + part translation'	12,360	0	12,360
Total	61,967	67,852	129,819

9.0 Appendix C: Canvassing trial design

Sampling for canvassing areas was conducted at the Stats NZ Statistical Area 2 level (SA2; approximately the size of a standard 'neighbourhood'). The selection of areas for canvassing was conducted in the following way:

- Because canvassers would be walking door-to-door, 'inaccessible' SA2s were excluded from possible selection.[32]
- SA2s were then selected using weighted random selection, with the percentage of Māori electors in each SA2 area acting as the weighting variable. This had the effect of making areas with higher levels of Māori electors more likely to be selected for canvassing. This weighting was applied to increase the sample size of Māori electors, in service of the project's objectives to trial ways of engaging Māori electors.
- Within each selected area, an address was randomly selected to act as the starting address.
- Canvassers were instructed to start at the address provided and to use simple rules to determine the route taken (e.g. turn left, right, left, etc.).

Canvassing was conducted during the voting period, by RockEnrol, who recruited, trained and supervised 20 canvassers. Half of these canvassers were Māori, and all canvassers were assigned (to the extent that it was possible) to areas where they were similar to the demographic characteristics of residents.

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[32] As defined by areas with very low and very high household density. Areas with particularly high density were excluded as they indicated the presence of apartments, most of which do not allow access to non-residents.

10.0 Appendix D: Canvassing scripts

Script 1: Making a plan + setting positive norms

Hello! My name is [name] and I'm from RockEnrol. We are an independent and non-partisan community organisation passionate about making sure as many people as possible vote in the upcoming local elections. How are you today?

Wait for answer and respond appropriately.

I'm knocking on people's doors today to ask folks if we can count on you voting in the upcoming local elections?

IF GOING TO VOTE: Great! I'm glad we can count on you. We are expecting a higher turnout than the last local election. Do you know what day or time you're going to vote?

Wait for answer and respond appropriately.

That sounds great! As a reminder, voting is open from now until noon on 12 October. Are you planning to post your vote or will you drop it off at a library or council centre?

Wait for answer.

If to post office: Awesome, make sure you do that before Tuesday 8 October. You can find your nearest post box at voteauckland.co.nz.

If to library/council centre: Awesome! Make sure you drop them in a ballot box at a library or council centre before noon on Saturday 12 October. You can find your nearest post box or ballot box at voteauckland.co.nz.

Thank you so much for voting!

IF NOT GOING TO VOTE: No need to worry. Can I help you figure out where and when you can vote?

If yes, help them make a plan to vote.
If no: Is there anything we can do to help you vote? Do you need information about the candidates or logistical information about how to vote?

If they haven't enrolled to vote: If you haven't enrolled, you can cast a special vote at one-stop shops being set up by Auckland Council where you can enrol and vote at the same time.

Thank you very much for your time. We are expecting a high turnout and every vote will count.

Script 2: Making a plan + setting positive norms + tapping into issues (purple text reflecting the difference between script 1 and 2)

Hello! My name is [name] and I'm from RockEnrol. We are an independent and non-partisan community organisation passionate about making sure as many people as possible vote in the upcoming local elections. How are you today?

Wait for answer and respond appropriately.

I'm knocking on people's doors today to ask folks if we can count on you voting in the upcoming local elections.

IF GOING TO VOTE: Great! I'm glad we can count on you. We are expecting a higher turnout than the last local election.

I'm voting this election because I'm really passionate about [Insert issues you're passionate about here e.g. having clean rivers and beaches, great public transport, more community events, safe roads, lots of playgrounds for kids and families]. What are some of the issues you're passionate about?

Wait for answer and respond appropriately.

Awesome, I can tell from your response you're someone who cares about our community and voting is one way we show we care, right? Are you planning to post your vote or will you drop it off at a library or council centre?

Wait for answer.

If to post office: Awesome, make sure you do that before Tuesday 8 October. You can find your nearest post box at voteauckland.co.nz.

If to library/council centre: Awesome! Make sure you drop them in a ballot box at a library or council centre before noon on Saturday 12 October. You can find your nearest post box or ballot box at voteauckland.co.nz.

Thank you so much for voting!

IF NOT GOING TO VOTE: No need to worry. Can I help you figure out where and when you can vote?

If yes, help them make a plan to vote.
If no: Is there anything we can do to help you vote? Do you need information about the candidates or logistical information about how to vote?

If they haven't enrolled to vote: If you haven't enrolled, you can cast a special vote at one-stop shops being set up by Auckland Council where you can enrol and vote at the same time.

Thank you very much for your time. We are expecting a high turnout and every vote will count.