Youth Voter Turnout in New Zealand:

Perceptions and Attitudes of Student Non-Voters in the 2010 Local Body Elections

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Abstract

Youth voter turnout has continued to decline for the past fifty years both internationally and in New Zealand. While attempts to explain this decline have been numerous, the theories of voter turnout focus heavily on national elections rather than local elections. This research uses focus groups to compare student perceptions and attitudes towards voting in national and local elections to better understand what drives non-voting behaviour in local elections. The preliminary results suggest that a lack of information, a high degree of transience, and a negative perception of the community all appeared to deter students from voting in local elections. Despite this, parents play a dominant role on their offspring's voting behaviour. Parental influence, both active and passive, is able to overcome some of the aforementioned inhibitors and has a positive effect on student voting behaviour.

Introduction

Youth voter turnout continues to be a hot topic among political commentators, particularly around election time. A vast body of literature has established that younger voters are significantly less likely to vote than mature voters (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980, Blais, 2000, Lyons and Alexander, 2000, Soule, 2001, Jennings and Stoker, 2002, Blais et al., 2004, Vowles, 2004, Rallings and Thrasher, 2006). Low youth voter turnout raises a number of concerns. As young citizens abstain from voting for the first time, they can establish a habit of non-voting later in life (Franklin, 2004). This can cause what is known as the 'generational effect' where younger non-voters progressively replace older voters, resulting in a steady decrease in overall voter turnout (Blais et al., 2004, p. 221, Vowles, 2004). Young voters are adversely affected by a cycle of disengagement. Issues and interests held by young citizens are overlooked by election candidates, due to young voters' weakened collective voting capacity, which further disengages them from political participation due to feeling ignored (Freyman & McGoldrick, 2000 in Kaid et al., 2007).

Despite the large body of literature on youth voter turnout and the importance of the issue, most studies disproportionately focuses on turnout at the national elections at the neglect of other types of elections. In particular, most of the literature on voter turnout in local elections remains quantitative, both internationally (Alford and Lee, 1968, Morlan, 1984, Bridges, 1997, Caren, 2007, Rallings and Thrasher, 2006) and in New Zealand (Local Government New Zealand, 2002, Cavana et al., 2004, Nielsen, 2003, Statistics New Zealand, 2009). Furthermore, very few studies adequately cover youth voting behaviour in local elections. The lack of attention given to local elections not only leaves us with a poor understanding of local election voting behaviour, but also removes a useful opportunity to compare attitudes and opinions between different types of elections to gain a better and broader understanding of voting behaviour.

This paper explores student perceptions and attitudes towards local elections using focus groups comprised of forty-four students from the University of Otago in New Zealand. It seeks to explain student non-voting behaviour in New Zealand local elections by comparing the reasons given for not voting in local elections, with the reasons for voting in the national and local elections. By exploring why students vote in one election, but not another, this

paper adds clarity and understanding behind the complexities of youth voter turnout in multiple elections.

The first section of this paper outlines some of the relevant literature on what influences voter turnout at both the national and local elections. The second section explains the methodology used. The third and fourth sections provide an overview and discussion of the findings. Overall, this research finds that a lack of information, a high degree of transience, and a negative perception of the community all appeared to deter students from voting in local elections. However, parental influence can override some of these factors and promote voting among students.

Explaining voter turnout

Young New Zealanders have poor voter turnout rates in both national and local elections. New Zealand Election Study (NZES) data from 2008 showed that approximately 22 per cent of eighteen to twenty-six year olds did not vote in the 2008 General Election, compared with 7.5 per cent of all other age demographics (Curtin, 2010, p. 561). In the 2001 New Zealand local elections, only 34% of those aged 18-29 voted, compared to an average turnout of 85% among those above 50 (Local Government New Zealand, 2002, p. 8). A number a theories and explanations attempt to account for this poor turnout in both the national and local elections.

Second order theory

Reif's 'second order theory' attributes the disparity in voter turnout between national and local elections to voters' perceptions that national elections are more important to them than local elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Reif argues that national elections are 'first order elections' since they reflect the dominant and critical role of the nation state. Other elections, such as the European, local, and provincial elections are seen as 'second order elections' as they have less influence than national governments do (Reif, 1984, p. 245). The fundamental assumption is that because there is less at stake in second order elections, voters are less interested and will be less likely to vote in those elections (Reif, 1984).

Several studies have found evidence of this theory in their comparative studies between national and local elections (Morlan, 1984, Rallings and Thrasher, 2006, Henderson and McEwen, 2010).

Community integration

McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy argue that community integration is an essential condition for political participation at the local level since "a lack of social networks and ties to the community makes participation undesirable and difficult" (McLeod et al., 1999, p. 316). Community integration is the idea that an increase in social ties with one's community increases their likeliness of political participation. Strong community integration is connected to low levels of residential transience, positive attitudes towards one's community, and high levels of community interaction (Sampson, 1988, Jeffres et al., 2002, Scheufele et al., 2002, Henderson and McEwen, 2010, p. 413). As Hooghe explains, young citizens tend to be much less politically socialized for a variety of reasons:

> Young people are not yet integrated into the labour market, they do not yet have children of their own and probably they do not own their own family house. All of this implies that they are less likely to be members of trade unions, parents' committees or neighbourhood watch associations. Furthermore, because of prolonged education, this young phase has a tendency to become extended in Western societies (Hooghe, 2004, p. 336).

Several studies link living in a community for a short period of time with a decreased likeliness of voting in local elections (Sampson, 1988, Scheufele et al., 2002, Local Government New Zealand, 2002). In a study of around 1200 students from the US, Niemi and Hanmer found that the students' proximity to their hometown had a significant impact on their likeliness to vote. Students were more likely to register in their hometown and as the distance to their hometown increased, the number who claimed to have voted decreased (Niemi and Hanmer, 2006, p. 14).

Socialisation

Socialisation theory argues that an individual's political beliefs, attitudes, and participation in adulthood are shaped by socialisation agents early in that individual's life (Simon and Merrill, 1998, Delli Carpini, 2000, Sheerin, 2007). Families, schools, churches and the media are all regarded as socialising agents (Simon and Merrill, 1998, Sheerin, 2007). Some scholars attribute declining rates of youth voter turnout to inadequate political socialisation (Cook, 1985, Teixeria, 1992, Lyons and Alexander, 2000, McDevitt and Kiousis, 2007). As Plutzer argues, parents play a vital role in providing basic information for their children, such as how to enrol and vote, and a model of behaviour to follow (Plutzer, 2002, p. 43). This is particularly important for first time voters. The influence from parents can augment their offspring's current knowledge and interest in politics, thus encouraging them to vote (Plutzer, 2002, Gross, 2007, Jones, 2007).

Information and knowledge

Adequate political knowledge is an essential requirement for citizens as it enhances their capacity to make informed voting decisions (Carpini and Keeter, 1996, pp. 219-220). Furthermore, there is a connection between the level of information a voter has and their likeliness of participating politically (Palfrey and Poole, 1987, Carpini and Keeter, 1996, Wattenberg et al., 2000, Larcinese, 2007). Lasse explored the political knowledge of voters in Copenhagen's local election using telephone surveys in 2000 and found that the average effect of being 'informed' increased that person's likeliness to vote by around 20 percentage points (Lasse, 2004, p. 115). In New Zealand, three studies confirm that a lack of political knowledge was the most common reason stated for not voting in the local elections. (Local Government New Zealand, 2002, p. 13, Nielsen, 2003, p. 157, Cavana et al., 2004, p. 10).

Different sources of information have varying degrees of influence on voter turnout. Television can facilitate passive learning and increase political knowledge in voters, encouraging them to vote (Krugman and Hartley, 1970, Zukin and Snyder, 1984, Kwak, 1995, Aarts and Semetko, 2003, Curran et al., 2009). However, this influence tends to be much weaker than newspapers (Feldman and Kawakami, 1991, p. 65, Schoenbach and Lauf, 2003), particularly in local elections (McLeod et al., 1999, Scheufele et al., 2002, Cavana et al.,

2004, Moy et al., 2004). When local news is absent in local elections, voter turnouts tends to be lower (Arbour and Hayes, 2005, Filla and Johnson, 2010). Face-to-face and direct mail contact from candidates and parties in local elections can also increase voter turnout (Gerber and Green, 2000, Gerber et al., 2002, Niven, 2004, Niemi and Hanmer, 2006, Schmitt-Beck and Mackenrodt, 2010).

Efficacy

Several studies have found a positive connection between higher levels of efficacy and an increased propensity to vote (Powell, 1986, Morlan, 1984, Rallings and Thrasher, 2006). Efficacy is generally defined as the feeling of being able to influence the political decision-making process (Goel, 1980, p. 127, Kaid et al., 2007, p. 1096). Usually, efficacy is divided into two categories. Internal efficacy is an individual's feelings of personal effectiveness, which is measured by levels of political interest, ease of understanding, and the perceived relevance of politics (Sheerin, 2007, p. 32, McLeod et al., 1999). External efficacy is the belief of how responsive the government will be to individual attempts at persuading them and is measured by the perceived trustworthiness, responsiveness, and representativeness of politicians, as well as the belief that one's vote can make a difference (Abramson, 1983, McLeod et al., 1999, Sheerin, 2007, p. 34). Young citizens tend to have low internal efficacy (Saha et al., 2005, Sheerin, 2007, Russell et al., 2002) and external efficacy, which is not necessarily caused by apathy, but by a lack of faith in politicians and the political system (Strama, 1998, p. 71, Delli Carpini, 2000, Orr and Hoover, 2005, Institute for Conflict Research, 2006, Harris et al., 2010).

Political information efficacy

Despite a large body of literature on the effects of efficacy and information on voter turnout, recent theorists have viewed these concepts as problematic when used to explain voter turnout among youth (Kaid et al., 2007, McKinney and Chattopadhyay, 2007, Lariscy et al., 2011). Studies on youth voter turnout indicate that young citizens lack confidence in their levels of political knowledge and regularly attribute non-voting to a perceived lack of information (Delli Carpini, 2000, Kaid et al., 2007, McKinney and Chattopadhyay, 2007,

Lariscy et al., 2011). As a result, Kaid, McKinney and Tedesco proposed the theory of political information efficacy, which is the feeling that an individual has enough information about political issues to make a difference in the political process (Kaid et al., 2007, Lariscy et al., 2011). While the theory mainly focuses on youth voters, it can be applied more broadly as research suggests that those who are better informed tend to feel more secure in their capacity to make a difference (Pinkleton and Austin, 2001).

Methodology

The objective of this research was to identify reasons for student non-voting in local elections – not by looking at non-voters per se – but by comparing and contrasting those who voted in both the national and local elections, and those who only voted in the national election. To uncover and explore these reasons, focus groups were chosen for their ability to obtain rich, naturalistic data comprised of the participants' interactions with each other, which provides insight into their assumptions, beliefs, and interpretations of experiences (Albrecht et al., 1993, Wilkinson, 1998, p. 189).

Participant selection

The sampling method was non-random and purposive, using a combination of volunteer and snowball sampling. Participants had to have been students at Otago University living in Dunedin during the 2010 local election and have voted in the 2008 General Election. The participants were divided according to whether or not they voted in the local election. Two of the non-voting focus groups were recruited from an undergraduate politics class. The remaining participants were recruited by the researcher, who was also a student, from his own personal networks and used those participants to recruit their friends. The objective of this method was to obtain as many 'friend groups' as possible (Gamson, 1992, p. 192, McNabb, 2004). Recruiting the friends of the researcher was seen as the most ideal method because peer groups are more likely to discuss certain issues, such as politics, more freely (Gamson, 1992, Devere, 1993, McNabb, 2004, Wilson-Kelly and Hayward, 2009).

Focus group composition

The selection process recruited a total of forty-four participants, spread over seven focus groups. Each group consisted of between five and seven participants. This number of participants exceeds the recommended number of around thirty, to allow for comparisons between groups as well as introducing additional questions and topics into subsequent groups (Berg, 2009, Morgan et al., 2008). Three of the focus groups contained participants who only voted in the national election and did not vote in the local election. Two groups were comprised of participants who voted in both the national and local elections. Finally, two groups were 'mixed' group, who all voted in the national election but contained a combination of those who did and did not vote in the local election. Scholars recommend having between three and five focus groups in order to reach 'saturation' (Morgan, 1997, Bloor et al., 2001). Saturation is reached when it is unlikely for any more "meaningful new insights" to emerge by increasing the amount of focus groups conducted (Morgan, 1997, p. 43).

The focus groups lasted between 15 and 30 minutes and were held in a seminar room at the University of Otago. All of the focus groups were recorded on digital video[1]. A postgraduate student moderated the focus groups and the researcher took the position as note taker, which was used to determine whether the focus groups had generated sufficient saturation.

Questions

The focus groups followed a semi-structured format, divided into three topics.

1. *Introduction:* participants were asked where there were from and what they studied. The question was used to get the participants comfortable with speaking around each other and to determine who was from outside of Dunedin.
2. *National elections:* All participants were asked why the voted in the national election.

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[1] However, one group was unable to be recorded on video. Instead, a voice recorder was used, but failed. This group contained students who voted in both the national and local elections.

3. *Local elections:* Depending on the group, the participants were asked why they voted/did not vote in the local election. Mixed groups were asked both.

The participants were encouraged to discuss these topics with each other. The moderator ensured that they remained on topic and followed up any interesting points made during the discussion.

Method of analysis

All of the recorded focus groups were transcribed. Both the transcripts and the researcher's notes were used to code the focus groups to detect the themes that emerged. The initial themes or explanations for (non)voting were first detected from the researcher's focus group notes, which acted as a filter to establish the most important data (Ryan and Bernard, 2003, p. 100). These provided a template of what the possible themes would be and provided an overarching impression of the salient themes within the data. The transcribes were analysed line-by-line and coded using a number of techniques to determine the emerging accounts for why participants had voted or not in both the national and local elections, such as repetition of concepts[2]. After these themes were extracted, the information was compiled to provide a general overview, which integrated the quotes and themes across all the focus groups.

Summary of findings

Eight major themes emerged from the coded data[3]. The names of the participants have been replaces with pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants.

Information and knowledge

The participants commented on the ease of acquiring information in the national election due to the media hype surrounding it, as well as the presence of political parties. The ease

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[2] For a more detailed explanation of methods used to detect and process themes, see Ryan and Bernard, 2003.
[3] The process of analysis produced vast amounts of data. For the sake of brevity, these findings have been truncated.

of obtaining knowledge appeared to encourage the participants to vote in the national election. In contrast, it was widely perceived by both voters and non-voters of the local election that there was a void of information on the local election. The few participants who did come across this information found it unhelpful and boring. Despite having a lack of information, some of the participants still voted in the national and local elections.

Ease of access to national election information

A common discussion by the participants was that an increase in media hype around the time of the national elections was a primary source of political information and encouraged them to vote. Here, the definition of 'hype' refers to both the quantity of coverage of the election and the quality and appeal (or excitement) of the coverage. Gina said that the media "go mad" around election time making it an easily accessible source to "see what's going on". For Hannah, like most of the participants, news information is usually consumed passively.

> *I think predominantly the information comes through the news and stuff. Like, I don't think unless you actively seek it out or take it upon yourself to, you know, go to the party website or look up who your particular MP is or whatever. I don't think there's...you do just mainly rely on the news for what they're putting out there...*

Jacinta felt that it was easy to get information from a political party's website. Fred mentioned that political parties made it easier to get information because "you don't have to find out each candidate's specialist views because they're all attached to parties" pointing out that "the party...has that long lasting, overarching principles that you can...keep voting with."

Lack of information on national election

However, many of the self-described 'uninformed' participants still chose to vote in the national election. Robert felt that he was "quite uninformed" when he voted in the national election and decided his vote by picking "an issue I thought would be the

most important and... went with the party which I thought addressed that issue the best." Courtney did not feel "passionate enough to go and research every party to pick the best one for me", but she too voted in the national election. She also stated that she "wouldn't know if the information is [out] there or not", when prompted by the moderator about getting additional information on political parties and candidates. Michelle also admitted to having very little knowledge on the national election, yet decided to vote regardless.

> *I didn't really know who I was voting for, to be honest, I just did it so I could...sounds horrible, but yeah...I had no idea...what the parties are about.*

Poor quantity and quality of local election coverage

While a lack of information did not seem to deter voting in the national election, this was not the case for the local election. One of the prominent reasons given by the participants for not voting in the local election was a perceived lack of information, which they linked to a perceived lack of media hype and attention towards local election issues. Even those who did vote in the local elections acknowledged this. Additionally, the local media was criticised and perceived negatively by the participants.

Lucy felt that "there wasn't the same kinda hype" in media coverage the local election compared to the national election. She stated that "I think around election time... you're so aware of the issues going on, that, election's happening – everyone's talking about it everywhere, whereas the local elections – I didn't feel like there was a buzz around it at all." Similarly, Mario believed that local elections were much blander than the national elections and pointed out the lack of media hype in the former.

> *I guess the main difference between the local and that national election is that the national election has a lot of coverage. A lot of media hype. You can really easily get into it whereas, with [the] local [election] it's a lot more, ah...yeah, a lot more bland I guess.*

For some participants, this lack of hype meant that they were completely unaware of the local elections all together. For others, it meant that they were unaware of how to vote, or even what they were voting for. Most of the participants lacked basic knowledge on what the City Councils and the District Health Board provided. Debbie stated that "I would've voted down here [in Dunedin]... if [the election] wasn't so downplayed, if there was more information about it and you kinda knew what you were voting for." The exception to this was with those who voted in the Auckland Supercity election, who commented that there was a lot of national media attention surrounding it because it was new.

However, other participants appeared to reject any information on the local elections outright due to its poor quality. When asked why he did not vote in the local election, Mario responded "I'd say [a] lack of information, but I threw most of the information in the bin". He felt that the information "was presented in a way I wasn't particularly bothered about so it just went straight over my head", which indicated that Mario found the local election boring *and* found the quality of information to be poor. Paige and Draco also discussed the poor quality and design of the information pamphlets sent to them about the local elections. Draco described them as "...the most boring pamphlets I've ever seen."

Some of the criticisms of the information available in the local election were extended to Dunedin's only daily newspaper. The *Otago Daily Times* has a circulation of 45,000, a market penetration of 76%[4], and is available online. There were mixed views regarding the usefulness of the *Otago Daily Times*. While some of the participants argued that subscribing to the *Otago Daily Times* could be a useful source of information for students, most of the participants disagreed.

Caitlin believed that "the only way to find out information about [the local election] was through the *ODT*" but felt that "some of their reporting was pretty average" She added that the 100 word blurbs candidates provided did not tell voters much about the candidates and that there was an unrealistic expectation to base one's vote on such poor information. Jacinta felt that the *Otago Daily Times* gave a "commentary"

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[4] Available at http://www.alliedpress.co.nz/papers.php?pub=odt (accessed 13/10/2011)

of the election as opposed to "actually giving you information on what was happening."

Murray quipped that "no student is going to get the ODT...for good reason – it's good for insulation." Neville pointed out that there was always things to read and view in the media about the national elections but mused that "where's with the local body, if you don't read the ODT, then....well, who does?" Murray and Neville are implying that no students bother to read the *Otago Daily Times* because of the poor quality of its content.

Several participants, who did not vote in the local election, felt daunted by obtaining information on the local elections and did not want to vote in case they made the 'wrong' decision. This was compounded by being reluctant to find out additional information in the first place. A conversation between Keith, Draco, and Dolores illustrates their preference for not voting rather than voting for someone who is a "complete dick" and be held accountable for doing so.

> *Draco: Cause it's almost like if you make the wrong decision voting someone who turns out to be a complete dick –*
>
> *Dolores: Yeah*
>
> *Keith: Yeah*
>
> *Draco: - then it's almost like people are gonna hold you accountable. Whereas if, whereas if you don't vote, then they can't do that.*
>
> *Keith: You feel like you should be knowing what you're talking about when you – which...it's a lot easier to say "na, I didn't vote"*

However, Dolores disagreed, stating that

> *...if you didn't vote, and somebody that was a complete dick got in then you're kinda accountable for letting them in, instead of voting for someone else who wasn't a dick.*

Interestingly, despite acknowledging a lack of information in the local election, some of the participants still voted in the local election. Amber appeared to vote almost arbitrarily.

> *Amber: ...for the local body ones, I didn't know anything about the people really, I just...picked people who looked interesting and different like they would come up with new ideas...pretty much.*
>
> *Moderator: was there any particular reason that you felt you should vote in the [local] election?*
>
> *Amber: Not really, just got a book of people and went to choose them *laughs**

Influence of Socialising Agents

In line with previous research on socialisation, most of the participants acknowledged the role of their parents in getting them to vote in the national, and for some, the local election. The focus groups reveal that parental influence is either 'active' or 'passive'.

Parental influence on national election voting

Murray described his parents' positive attitude towards voting and how that actively encouraged him to vote.

> *I sorta feel compelled to vote in a way 'cause my parents are quite [big] advocates of voting. So, I've always been like, you know, sorta told to vote – not told to vote, but, you know, encouraged to vote and so it's just sorta stemmed from that and then I sorta feel an obligation to come out of that.*

In an extreme example of parental influence, Arnold stated that he only voted in the national election because his parents provided him with a material incentive to do so.

> *It was actually my birthday on national elections and mum and dad were sick of me not voting and said, you know, "if you get out of the house and come down*

with me, we'll get you a present at the same time", so that's actually why I voted last election.

In other cases, the role of parents on their children's voting behaviour was much more passive. Peter explains that "I didn't really have much of an excuse [to not vote in the national election] because my whole family was voting and the polling booth was right down the road. So, we all sorta went as a group so I couldn't really get away from it." John, Peter, and Shaniqua all stated that while their family rarely talked about political issues, they still always go out and vote.

Parental influence on local election voting

As with the national elections, many of the participants who voted in the local election attributed their decision to vote as partly to do with the influence of their parents. When prompted why she voted in the local election, Courtney responded "...cause again, my parents always have [voted in the local election]. It's like a wee family day, go down and vote." A similar response was expressed by many of those participants who voted in the local election.

When ask why they voted in the local elections for a second time at the end of the focus group, some interesting dialogue emerged between Flora, Debbie, Murray, and Hannah.

Murray: - Because my mum sent my mail down

Hannah: Yeah! -

Debbie (simultaneously): Yeah

Hannah: - Mum sent my mail down and was like "you should probably vote for this" –

Murray (simultaneously): - you should vote for this –

Hannah: - and then I thought "yeah, I probably should"...and I did it

The latter three admitted that they voted in the local election, at least partly, due to their parents sending down their voting forms to them and literally instructing them to vote. Flora appeared to have voted arbitrarily.

> *I just did it to do it I guess...there was no reason.*

Earlier in the focus group, Flora had admitted that she was effectively used as a proxy vote for her parents, stating that "I think I just voted for who my parents voted for to give them another number, but like, it doesn't really matter to me." It is unclear why she gave different reasons at different times.

Transience

Around 75% of students at Otago University are from outside of Dunedin[5]. The transient nature of the participants appeared to play an important role in their decision not to vote in the local election (both in Dunedin and their home town). Many of the participants felt that since they intended to leave Dunedin once they had graduated from their studies, the outcome of the local election would not affect them. Therefore, they felt no desire to vote.

George stated that "I'm only going to be here another year after this, so the changes that happen to Dunedin won't really affect me very much". Molly mentioned that the local election "doesn't really impact me as much [because] I'm here as a student quite temporally... it's not a – not that much of a big passion for me". Donna acknowledged that local elections "could be really important and relevant" but pointed out that "a lot of us are just kinda here temporally while we're studying. So, we don't see that long term effect." Being transient made some of the participants feel disconnected from both their hometowns and Dunedin. When asked if he would be more inclined to vote in the local election back at his home, Walter responded

> *Not really, cause you don't spend any time at home either. So, like, it really – here would be the place you should vote but it doesn't seem like anything here is*

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[5] http://www.otago.ac.nz/about/quickstats.html#8 (accessed 29/10/11)

useful to us, so why vote here? And we don't spend any time at home, so why vote at home?

Despite this, some of the participants mentioned that they would vote in the local election once they "settled down" and had a family.

Another significant concept that emerged from the focus groups was that the participants who did not vote in the local election felt that there was no point in voting because they believed they were not ratepayers or property owners. For Dolores, the national elections "actually affect your life so much more than local body ones do because, I mean, none of us are really, like, property owners, the rates don't really matter and it's actually the big stuff that affects us I guess..." Henry argued that there was no point in voting because he believed that students were not ratepayers.

Furthermore, some participants pointed out the difficultly of being a transient student and the logistical issues of receiving national election voting papers. Donna explained that as a student, "we change [address] every year" meaning that when they are sent their voting paper physically through the mail "a lot of people's mail just gets lost somewhere in Dunedin." Jacinta said that she had her voting papers sent to her mother's house in Christchurch, noting that "but then it's, like, 'everything's in Christchurch' and so..." implying that getting her voting forms sent to Christchurch still made it difficult for her to physically receive the forms for voting. Murray, who voted in the Auckland Supercity election, felt that "being down in Dunedin and voting for the Auckland Supercity [is] a bit more of a procedure cause... you have to get them sent down here...[and] send it away yourself" but still described voting as being "easy".

Importance of electoral participation

Previous research shows that if an individual believes that an election is important, they are much more likely to vote in it. Two subthemes emerged regarding in the perceived importance of electoral participation. First, the perceived importance of the national and local elections. Second, the perceived importance of the act of voting itself.

Importance of the elections

Many of the participants who did not vote in the local election felt that the local election was not important, or at least not as important as the national election. In justifying her lack of interest for the local election, Gina stated that "I guess I care more about... whether my student loan is gonna have interest on it, than what day rubbish goes out." Fred mentioned that the "big overarching policies" of the national election "are going to affect me in the next four years whether I'm in Dunedin or up north, you know, wherever I am". He points out that "if the local election in Dunedin goes a particular way and local government – and I'm very upset with it – can always move and that's covered by the stuff that I voted for in the national election". In contrast, some participants who voted in the local election felt that the local elections were more important than the national elections because they felt that they had more influence on their lives.

Importance of voting

Voting in the national election was seen as important by most of the participants. When prompted by the moderator which vote (the electoral or party vote) they thought was the most important in the national elections, Dolores and Draco believed that it was more important to know that your vote counted in the first place. Draco added that "you have to go into [the voting booth] with the mindset that it does count...otherwise, why would you vote?"

Not only did the participants feel that it was important to vote but also justified why they believed this. The participants mentioned some of the concerns surrounding adequate democratic representation and the negative consequences of not voting in the national election. Gina believed that "if everyone else decided not to vote... some minority could take over and put God knows what party in." Paige felt that voting is "quite important" because "...it's our say and that whoever it is that's gonna be leading us. So, of course we've gotta vote."

Interestingly, while most of the participants saw the importance of voting for democratic reasons and to 'have their say,' a common theme that came up in the focus groups was the novelty of being able to vote in the first place. Many participants were more inquisitive about voting as an activity to 'try out' for the first time without having a particular interest in politics or even expressing their views. Shaniqua stated that "it was kinda a coming of age thing too, like, I'd just, like, turned 18. Yeah, didn't have strong political views but thought 'yeah, may as well'."

Additionally, the phrase "if you don't vote, you can't complain" was commonly stated as a reason for voting in the national elections. While this idea was contested in one focus group, most of the participants generally agreed with the statement. The justification for this statement was that if you "abstain from voting, then you have no real grounds to complain, cause you didn't vote and you didn't contribute." Hannah sums up the general feeling towards not voting in the national elections.

> *And also I feel that if you haven't had any input into the process, then...it's kinda hard to sit back and criticise or congratulate the government for something it's done if – it's particularly criticised if you didn't play an active role in either enabling that government to get in or voting for a different party.*

Despite acknowledging the importance of voting in the national election, none of the non-voting participants applied the same reasoning to the local election.

Ease of voting

The type of electoral system appeared to influence the ease of voting. Most participants found it painless to vote in the national election, partly due to MMP being "easy." However, STV was seen as difficult to understand by those who did not vote in the local election.

MMP

Frank and Keith acknowledged that they could not remember exactly how to vote in the national elections, but claimed that they remember it being "easy" to do so. Some

participants felt that the process was so easy that it was anticlimactic. Draco explains how easy and underwhelming it was voting in the national elections for the first time.

It was my first time voting, this big build up, been thinking about who I was gonna to vote for the elections, couldn't quite make up my mind - and then I go to do it, it's just, like, oh, "tick tick, done", thirty seconds.

STV

In contrast, all of the participants who did not vote in the local election felt that it was difficult to vote in the local election due to a difficulty in understanding the Single Transferable Vote system. When prompted about the ease of voting in the local elections, Frank felt that it was "more difficult". Draco stated that "yeah...I think STV in general is a much more complicated system than MMP...and I personally don't particularly understand it all that well".

Furthermore, there were some participants who voted in the local election who found the voting process difficult. The combination of a difficulty in understanding how to vote and a lack of interest appeared to influence some participants to use their vote relatively arbitrarily. Courtney stated that she "found [STV] quite hard" and that she "probably just [voted] alphabetically or something ridiculous like that because I didn't care." Both Courtney and Cindy described STV as "stupid." However, some of the participants who voted in the local election preferred STV because it empowered their vote.

Interest in politics

As we saw in the section on transience, some participants viewed local elections as unimportant. Some of the non-voting participants said that they found the national elections much more interested than the local elections since the national election were more important and less dull. The following extract highlights a conversation between Hermione, George, Draco and Walter about what makes the national elections more interesting than the local elections. The main reasons were there was a "battle of ideologies" and that

national elections were more entertaining. Draco argued that the issues in local elections were just "irrelevant".

> *Draco: I think a lot of the time the...reason people that wouldn't vote in the local body, but they would in national is that the issues that elections are fought over at local body...they're just kinda irrelevant. Like, all the candidates for mayor get... so into these really petty arguments over stuff that doesn't actually really matter. Whereas at, like, cause it's just for such a small constituency, or is it for the whole, for the whole country over things that do impact a lot of people.*

> *Hermione: Yeah, I think it all comes down to interest. Like, I find the national elections really interesting. But then just local [elections are] not, like, gripping or anything. It just doesn't simulate my interest.*

> *Moderator: So, what is it that makes the national body elections so much more interesting?*

> *George: There is a battle of ideologies, which doesn't occur in the locals.*

It may be the case that the perceived greater media coverage of the national election may help to legitimise and reinforce the view that they are more important than local elections in the eyes of young voters, since they are deemed more worthy to cover by the media.

Furthermore, many of the participants who did not vote in the local election expressed an outright disinterest towards the local election campaign. Walter mentioned that the national election was more entertaining than the local election. Some pointed out that being a student made them care less about what goes on in the Otago region. Other participants expressed outright apathy towards the region and the local election in general. Fred stated that "...who cares what happens in the wider Otago region? How many students leave the city? How many students have a car? How many students just walk around the city? Like, who cares?"

In contrast, many of the participants had directly or indirectly had some interest in politics at the national level. Murray felt that because he came from a background of studying law and politics that "you're even more compelled to have a vote then because... you sorta immerse yourself in that subject." Other participants stated that there were interested or "cared" about politics, without providing any specific reason why.

Role of the candidates

As mentioned previously, many of the participants acknowledged the role that political parties played on the information they received about the national election. Two aspects emerged regarding the role of candidates in the local election. First, the participants felt that the local election candidates were of 'poor' quality. Second, the participants perceived the Dunedin City Council and election candidates to be indifferent or hostile towards students.

Poor quality of the election candidates

A highly negative attitude towards local election candidates was displayed by the non-voting participants. Henry jested that "in some ways the quality of the candidates in local body elections bring the whole process down." When asked why she did not vote in the local election, Dolores exclaimed that "all the candidates were crap!" She later described the mayoral candidate talk held at the university as "pretty much a debacle" explaining that "one guy fell off the stage [and] one guy was super racist." Hermione also felt that "heaps of candidates" in the local election were running "as a joke".

Perceived hostility and indifference towards students

Caitlin had the impression that those who ran in the local elections were very negative towards students. In reference to the candidate talk held at the university, she heard that the candidates talking highly negatively towards students, which made her feel detached.

> *Apparently none of them had anything positive to say about student, like, anything constructive. That was what I read about it. One of them even said*

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something incredible derogatory about how students like to live in scummy houses and stuff like that, and...I was like, wow, I'm not really...interested in following you further.

Jacinta expressed a similar negativity towards the Dunedin City Council stating that

Doesn't, like, the council use students as a... scapegoat when, like, something goes wrong? ...it's, like, why would we vote for you? Any of you?

Lack of representation

The negative perceptions of the local election candidates were compounded by a perceived lack of representation by the participants, who felt that the candidates did not focus on issues that were related to students. Ginny stated that

It just felt that there was no target at student votes, like, maybe because they assume from previous years that students don't tend to vote. But maybe if they had made an effort to be on campus, or...did more advertising around campus perhaps more people would have voted at the elections. Or, if they presented policies that would be favourable to students.

Caitlin said that "as a students, it felt like there was no point in voting cause you weren't who they were trying to get to vote. You weren't their target market, basically. So, it felt like if you voted as a student, you'd have absolutely no impact cause all of the really conservative voters in Dunedin were going to choose the mayor."

Discussion

In line with the literature on political information efficacy, the students' perception of being uninformed appeared to be the major obstacle to voting in the local elections. While some of the participants were reluctant to vote because they did not want to mistakenly vote in the 'wrong person', other participants simply lacked even the most basic of institutional information, such as how to vote and when to do so. This lack of information discouraged the students from voting. So, *why* did these non-voters feel uninformed?

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Supply factors

A combination of factors left students feeling uninformed. In terms of the perceived supply of information, the media, candidates, and the council were all viewed negatively by the participants. Additionally, the absence of political parties appeared to remove a potential source of information for students.

Media

When compared with the national election, all of the participants acknowledged that there was less 'hype' surrounding the local election and/or found the quality of the information presented to them unappealing. In particular, the *Otago Daily Times* was heavily criticised and mocked by the participants. The few students who admitted to reading the *Otago Daily Times* found the coverage inadequate and unhelpful. None of the participants mentioned reading it online. This highly negative attitude towards the Otago Daily Times is likely to deter students from becoming more informed about the local elections, which can reduce their inclination to vote.

Furthermore, the quantity of the coverage on the local election was seen as poor and difficult to obtain. The exception to this was with those who voted in the Auckland Supercity election, who noted that it received widespread national media coverage. Despite a number of potential local sources of information, such as Dunedin's local television station Channel 9 and two small, free weekly community newspapers – The Star[6] and D-Scene[7], none of the participants mentioned them. This suggests that even if these mediums were consumed, the participants did not see them as important.

These findings are in line with the literature that connects inadequate local media coverage with low voter turnout (Scheufele et al., 2002, McLeod et al., 1999, Moy et al., 2004, Filla and Johnson, 2010). It is possible that this perceived lack of hype surrounding the local

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[6] The Star is delivered to 43,500 homes in Dunedin outlying towns. - http://www.alliedpress.co.nz/papers.php?pub=str - accessed 2/11/11

[7] D Scene has a circulation of 49,129 and a readership of 54,000 - http://www.fairfaxmedia.co.nz/ad-centre/newspaper-details.dot?id=11514 - accessed 2/11/11

election is linked to a lack of national media coverage on the local election. The participants' reluctance to vote in the local election being due to most of the participants mentioned the (presumably national) news as a passive source of information.

Candidates

The influence of candidates on students' lack of information has two aspects. First, the participants felt that both the candidates and the Dunedin City Council made no active effort to contact students, let alone to win their votes. This made them felt less inclined to become involved in the first place. Second, the perceived lack of information was compounded by a highly negative perception of the candidates. Even those who did have some small contact with the candidates said that they felt as though the candidates did not care about students.

Most of the negative comments came from those who did not vote in the local election, who perceived the candidates as farcical. The perception was that the Dunedin City Council generally dislikes students, often treating them as "scapegoats." Many of the participants did not feel that they were adequately represented by the council or candidates because the policies they discussed were perceived to be unrelated to students. This finding detracts away from the literature, which finds that face-to-face interaction with candidates encourages voter turnout (Niven, 2004, Niemi and Hanmer, 2006). It appears that contact with candidates needs to be positive in order to encourage students to vote the local election.

Parties

Some participants did mention that having political parties from the national election in the local elections would be helpful because it made it easier to "know what you're getting" with each candidate. There was some discussion about the political party affiliations of candidates in other local elections. Political parties can offer cognitive shortcuts when vast amounts of information is available, but 'cues' when there is only a small amount of information (Rahn, 1993). Since the participants were not receiving information from the

media, it relies on party labels. A lack of political parties in the local election appears to deprive student voters of this information shortcut.

Demand Factors

However, a perceived lack of information can also be attributed to the low demand for information on the local elections from students. A lack of community integration, interested, and attached importance to the local election appeared to deter students from obtaining additional information and voting. Many students also found it difficult to understand the STV voting system.

Transience and low community integration

The transient nature of students meant that some participants were less proactive in seeking out information about the local election. Some felt detached from both their hometown and Dunedin, seeing themselves as 'floaters'. This detached feeling from Dunedin appeared to be exasperated by the participants' negative perceptions of the candidates and the Dunedin City Council. Since positive attitudes towards one's community and high levels of community interaction are important measures for high community integration (Sampson, 1988, McLeod et al., 1999, Jeffres et al., 2002), students who feel that candidates are not engaging them may feel increasingly isolated and disconnected with their wider community. This low level of community integration in students decreases the likelihood that they will vote in the local election (McLeod et al., 1999).

Unimportance of local election

Furthermore, a lack of community integration also appears to reduce the perceived important of the local election. Since the students were not residing in Dunedin for any prolonged period of time, some were apathetic towards the local elections. In addition, the findings of this research indicate strong support for second order theory. It was widely believed that the national election was important to vote in to 'have their say'. National elections were seen as more important because their policies were more widespread and

influential. Moreover, there was a "battle of ideologies" that was simply lacking in the local election. However, most of the participants, particularly those who did not vote in the local election, felt that the local election was not important or simply less important than the national election. Local Government policies were seen as insignificant since the participants believed that they were not ratepayers, despite paying rates indirectly through their rent.

Not interested in the election

In line with second order theory, both a lack of community integration combined with a perceived lack of importance of the local election made students less interested in local issues. Some students claimed that the national elections were more entertaining. Many of the participants, including those who still voted in the local election, describe them as bland and relatively boring. The lack of interest appeared to make the participants less inclined to actively seek out information on the local elections. This meant that they were depended on the passive consumption of the national media. A lack of interest was probably compounded by the perceived poor quality of the local election information provided to students.

Too complicated to vote

Almost all of the participants found it easy to vote in the national election, which can be partly attributed to the ease of the MMP system. Both voters and non-voters in the local election found it more difficult to vote due to a difficulty in understanding the system. The perceived complication of the STV voting system appeared to discourage some students from voting.

Inconsistencies

However, despite claiming that a lack of information caused by the aforementioned factors, deterred participants from voting in the local election, not all were deterred from voting. The paradox appears clearer when viewed across the different focus groups. Why is it that some students vote in the local election, while describing themselves as uninformed, yet claim that they did not vote in the local election due to a lack of information? Furthermore,

why do some students vote in the local election with a lack of information, while others do not? This creates a puzzle for political information efficacy. While less informed voters are less likely to vote than informed voters (Kaid et al., 2007), why is it that some still vote despite having low political information efficacy? One possible reason is the dominant influence of parents on their children's voting behaviour.

Socialisation

The most salient reason for voting in both the national and local elections can be attributed to the active and passive roles of the participants' parents. An obligation to vote and parental influence appear to be intrinsically linked. It is this obligation to vote that can override a number of factors that could potentially discourage students to vote. Parental encouragement and guidance to vote in both the national and local election provide their children with an increase in institutional knowledge, such as the procedure of voting and how to vote (Plutzer, 2002) and stimulate electoral interest (Gross, 2007). This parental influence is particularly prevalent in those who voted in the local elections. In some cases, the participants' parents help to send down their children's voting forms, which encouraged them to vote. In other cases, parental encouragement was so strong that some of the participants simply voted for what seemed to be the sake of voting, without putting any meaning thought into who they voted for. Without parental influence, the non-voting students lacked sufficient insulation against factors such as a negative perception of the information provided to them and transience, which decrease the likeliness of voting.

Conclusion

It appears that the claim made by the participants that they did not vote in the local election because of a lack of information should not be taken entirely at face value. While it seems that some students probably would have been more likely to vote if there had there been more information available to them that was presented in a more appealing manner, a reluctance to consume information, particularly from local sources, hindered information acquisition. This lack of consumption appeared to be caused by a combination of a negative

perception of Dunedin's media and the City Council/candidates, as well as a lack of attached interest and importance attached to local elections, due to the students' transient nature.

However, this research has highlighted that students can have low levels and knowledge and information, yet still vote in both the national and local elections – a factor that may have been missed by some quantitative methods. The cause of this appears to be parental influence, both active and passive, which can override nearly all of the negative factors that deter students from vote in the local election and encourage voting.

Given these findings, what can be done to improve student voter turnout in local elections? Improving the quality and quantity of information presented to students and having election candidates (and the City Council) engage in discussions more relevant to students may help to decrease students' negative perceptions of local elections and stimulate turnout. However, the transient nature of students and a lack of parental influence may prove to be difficult factors to overcome. Ironically, it is possible that informing and encouraging parents to vote may be a more effective way of encouraging students to vote in local elections.

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