

**The Electoral Commission**  
*Research to explore voters' experience of voting  
and attitudes towards the voting process  
at the 2005 General Election*  
**Qualitative Research Findings**

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## CONTENTS

	PAGE
<b>1. BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1.1 Background</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1.2 Research Objectives</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. RESEARCH METHOD AND SAMPLE</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3. MANAGEMENT SUMMARY</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4. MAIN FINDINGS</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>4.1 Sample Comments</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>4.2 The Polling Station Experience</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>4.3 Voting at a Polling Station</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>4.4 The Postal Voting Experience</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>4.5 Voting by Post</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>4.6 ‘Don’t do politics’ Advertising</b>	<b>28</b>
<i>4.6.1 Television Advertising</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>4.6.2 Radio Advertising</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>4.6.3 Press Advertising</i>	<i>32</i>
<b>4.7 The Electoral Commission</b>	<b>33</b>

# 1. BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

## 1.1 Background

The Electoral Commission (EC) is an independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament in November 2000. The Commission aims to increase public confidence in the democratic process within the United Kingdom - and encourage people to take part - by modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters and regulating political parties.

The General Election, which took place on May 5<sup>th</sup> 2005, allowed the electorate to vote at polling stations, or via a postal ballot on demand. The Electoral Commission commissioned qualitative research in order to understand voters' attitudes towards the voting process and voters' experiences of the process of voting. The research explored the views and experiences of those who voted at polling stations and the views and experiences of those who voted by post.

The findings from the research will inform The Electoral Commission's Statutory Report on the General Election as well as contributing to the evidence base regarding voting channels and voting.

## 1.2 Research Objectives

The research objectives were as follows:

- To investigate voters' experience of voting and how the voting materials contributed to this experience for both postal voters and those voting at polling stations

- To discover whether voters sought official advice before voting, and if so, from which sources
- To explore the effectiveness of the ballot papers and accompanying materials in terms of: tone, comprehension, content, format, use of visuals and ease of use
- To assess the effectiveness of the supplementary information provided at polling stations and within the postal ballot packs
- To determine awareness of, and opinions, regarding the ballot paper numbers

More specific objectives for postal voters were:

- To understand how postal voters interacted with the voting pack
- To explore postal voters' opinions of the 'declaration of identity'

An additional research objective was:

- To explore voters' awareness of and opinions regarding the 'Don't do politics' campaign

NB: Voters were asked for their feedback regarding the television, radio and press executions from the 'Don't do politics' campaign although they are not the key audience for the campaign as they were committed voters.

## 2. METHOD AND SAMPLE

Research Works Limited conducted **24 qualitative, one-to-one depth interviews of 45 minutes – 1 hour duration** with voters in the 2005 General Election.

The sample criteria were as follows:

- All respondents had voted in the 2005 General Election (either at a polling station or via postal ballot)
- All respondents were therefore aged 18 years or over
- All respondents were therefore registered on the Electoral Register
- All respondents were resident in Great Britain
- Anyone working in local or regional government, or for a political party were excluded from the research
- Anyone who campaigned on behalf of a political party in the 2005 General Election was also excluded from the research

The sample is described in detail in the table below. In summary, the sample was divided as follows:

- Equally divided male and female
- Equally divided between four age categories: 18-25 years old, 26-45 years old, 46-60 years old and 61+ years old
- Equally divided between three socio economic groups: ABC1, C2 and DE
- Equally divided between those voting at a polling station and those voting via postal ballot
- A spread of educational attainment was achieved
- A mix of ethnic minority background was achieved

- 4 interviews were with first time voters (of whom 2 had voted at a polling station and 2 had voted via a postal ballot)
- In addition, the majority of postal voters were voting by post for the first time

	<b>ABC1</b>	<b>C2</b>	<b>DE</b>
<b>18-25 years</b>	1. Male (Polling) 2. Female (Postal)	9. Male (Postal) 10. Female (Polling)	17. Male (Polling) 18. Female (Postal)
<b>26-45 years</b>	3. Male (Postal) 4. Female (Polling)	11. Male (Polling) 12. Female (Postal)	19. Male (Polling) 20. Female (Postal)
<b>46-60 years</b>	5. Male (Polling) 6. Female (Postal)	13. Male (Postal) 14. Female (Polling)	21. Male (Postal) 22. Female (Polling)
<b>61+ years</b>	7. Male (Postal) 8. Female (Polling)	15. Male (Polling) 16. Female (Postal)	1. Male (Postal) 2. Female (Polling)

Interviews were conducted in the following locations between 18<sup>th</sup> May and 1<sup>st</sup> June 2005:

- Moston (Manchester Withington)
- Dundee (Dundee East and Dundee West)
- Camarthen (Camarthen West)
- Chippenham (Wilshire North\*)

\* In Wiltshire North voters were able to vote in the County Council Election as well as the General Election.

### 3. MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

All the sample claimed to be committed to voting (at least at General Elections). They reported that they voted on principle (inspired by a sense of duty and tradition) and were therefore likely to continue to vote on principle in the future, regardless of the political context. Respondents also reported that they were keen to be part of the democratic process, with a majority wanting to 'do their bit'. The 'Don't Do Politics' campaign very much mirrored their voting ethic – *'if you don't vote, you can't complain'*.

Although respondents were committed to voting, on the whole they were not highly engaged with the democratic process. There was little evidence to suggest that respondents were actively debating the issues or seeking out information about different candidates or policies. None had sought official advice prior to voting and none felt that campaigning had influenced their vote in any way. Some however had discussed their vote with their families and read door-dropped leaflets from local candidates.

For this sample, voting had become a rather functional process, with many voters not making an active decision about who to vote for, but simply voting habitually. All had decided who to vote for prior to arriving at the polling station or completing their postal ballot and most claimed that they voted for parties, rather than individual candidates.

Polling stations are still perceived as the default voting option. Voters were very satisfied with this method of voting which was familiar, trusted, efficient (i.e. speedy) and convenient in terms of opening hours and locations. On the whole, polling station voters did not feel that the experience of voting at a polling station could be improved. Recall of supplementary information was variable, but a majority of the sample felt that assistance was unnecessary, given that a majority had voted before and therefore already knew how to vote. In fact most respondents assumed that voting was so straightforward that no additional information could be offered.

However, it emerged that voters at polling stations do need to be reminded to mark their ballot paper with a cross (not a tick). This information needs to be prominent at the time of marking the ballot paper i.e. either on the ballot paper itself or in the booth. A small minority felt that a step-by-step guide for first time voters could be helpful; a small minority also suggested that the name of the party (rather than the candidate) should be the most prominent information on the ballot paper.

The majority of postal voters had chosen to vote by post out of necessity rather than preference. A majority of postal voters had been physically unable to reach the polling station, either due to work commitments, overseas travel or disability. Only a minority of voters had voted by post out of preference.

The postal ballot pack was well received in terms of clarity and simplicity. Once again, voters felt that the process of voting was straightforward. The majority felt that the witness statement was easy to complete (although one respondent with limited mobility had found this process more problematic). However, when prompted, most wondered whether this was an entirely worthwhile process, given that it would be very easy to claim to be someone else.

Inevitably, respondents (both those voting by post and at polling stations) mentioned security concerns about postal voting. The perceived unreliability of the postal service was a much more pressing 'real world' concern than concern regarding fraud.

Overall, postal voters were largely satisfied by their chosen method of voting and felt that they would be prepared to vote by post again in the future. However, a minority felt that they would still prefer to visit the polling station, to eliminate any element of uncertainty.

For those voting at polling stations, postal voting was perceived to offer an alternative method of voting (useful for those physically unable to reach the polling station on a particular polling day). However, at present, postal voting was not perceived to offer any particular advantages over voting at a polling station (unless they were physically unable to reach the polling station). Unlike postal voters, the majority of those voting at polling

stations did not have any concerns about the security of their vote. Putting one's own vote directly into the ballot box also offered a level of certainty that was particularly important for older voters who were less willing to trust the Royal Mail with their vote.

Respondents were asked their views regarding the television, radio and press executions from the 'Don't do politics' campaign. Their views should be considered in the context that they are not the intended target audience for the campaign as they were committed voters.

When prompted, a majority recalled the 'Don't do politics' television adverts. By comparison, only a minority – again when prompted – recalled the 'Don't do politics' radio and press adverts. The television advert continues to be well received in terms of visual appeal, light-hearted tone and strong communication of a message which chimed with voters' own reasons for voting.

Overall, the busy, 'cheesy', style of the radio adverts failed to engage this audience of committed voters. Respondents felt that the adverts lacked impact and standout amongst other talk-based radio content. Only a minority of ABC1 respondents appreciated the ironic approach, but the oldest respondents were simply confused and the remainder felt that this was a rather complicated way of expressing the 'Don't do politics' message. The radio adverts were felt to have moved too far away from the self-explanatory formula of the television adverts.

Although not being the target audience for the press advert, on the whole, respondents felt that the execution could be improved. They felt that the press advert lacked impact, and felt that colour would give the execution more standout. The press advert clearly communicated the 'don't sit on the fence' message. Some respondents felt that the use of irony in the text was too sophisticated and open to misinterpretation, particularly amongst a tabloid audience.

Overall, a majority supported the idea of encouraging people to vote and a majority engaged with the television adverts. Although a very small minority felt that they had heard enough of the ‘Don’t do politics’, the core message – as expressed by the television adverts - was still very much endorsed. For the future, some voters preferred an emphasis on more positive approaches, for example, emphasising the importance of exercising one’s democratic rights.

## 4. MAIN FINDINGS

### 4.1 Sample Comments

All respondents claimed to be committed voters (at least in the sense of being committed to voting at General Elections). Their self-reported level of commitment was that they either ‘always voted in General Elections’ or ‘voted in General Elections most of the time’. Respondents were generally keen to describe themselves as committed voters. It should be noted that The Electoral Commission Campaign tracking research has demonstrated that some respondents ‘over claim’ their voting record.

There were two factors that respondents felt motivated them to vote. Firstly, voters - regardless of age - felt that they were motivated by a sense of duty. They were conscious that voting was something that should not be taken for granted:

*“...I think if I didn’t take up the opportunity to vote it would be an insult to everyone who fought for the right to vote.” (Female, ABC1, 18-25 years)*

*“It’s something that a lot of people in the world don’t get to do. It’s such a waste if you don’t do it.” (Male, ABC1, 26-45 years)*

*“Women fought for the right to vote, so we should use our vote.” (Female, DE, 61+ years old)*

Secondly, voters were motivated by a desire to be part of the democratic process, commonly articulated by a sense that: *“If you don’t vote, you can’t complain.”*

Respondents wanted to project an image of themselves as active participants, and to distance themselves from an apathetic attitudinal stance that they felt was prevalent:

*“You shouldn’t just sit and moan about the government if you can’t be bothered to get out there and say, this is what I think, I’m putting my cross there.” (Female, ABC1, 46-60 years old)*

*“You’ve got to vote to get things to change.” (Female, DE, 26-45 years old)*

Many also reported that voting was a family tradition that had been instilled in them by their parents. Families, regardless of socio economic group, were still instrumental in encouraging younger people to vote:

*“I can still hear my father’s voice ringing in my ears.” (Female, ABC1, 46-60 years)*

*“My mum was on at me to vote.” (Female, DE, 18-25 years old, first time voter)*

*“My gran talked to me about who I should vote for.” (Female, C2, 18-25 years old, first time voter)*

All respondents claimed that they remained motivated to vote, regardless of the particular political situation at the time of any General Election. Respondents did not feel that they could ever be discouraged from voting (and would vote differently to usual, if dissatisfied with their habitual choice, rather than not vote at all). However, a minority also felt there were even more reasons to vote in the 2005 General Election. Additional reasons included an awareness of a potentially low turn out, protest voting (about the War on Iraq), nationalist voting (in Camarthen) and tactical voting.

None felt that campaigning by political parties had influenced their vote in any way. Moreover, respondents were keen to insist that they did not want to be influenced by campaigning, which was described by a minority as ‘marketing’. It is therefore likely that respondents did not want to admit to being influenced by advertising. It seemed that respondents wanted to be seen to be making their own choices, based on their own thinking:

*“I think it’s more about the policy and the issues on a conceptual level, rather than a marketing campaign.” (Male, ABC1, 26-45 years old)*

*“Seeing the literature didn’t really influence my vote. It’s just me and the ballot box!”  
(Male, ABC1, 46-60 years old)*

Perceptions of campaigning at the 2005 General Election were very generalised and focussed on the volume of coverage:

*“I saw all the usual stuff on television – you couldn’t avoid those. I got fed up of it all.”  
(Female, ABC1, 46-60 years old)*

*“Any advertising about the election I would have ignored. It just got too much.”  
(Male, C2, 46-60 years old)*

At best, some had listened to media coverage and read door-dropped leaflets, but there was very little interest in discussing the campaign approaches adopted by different parties. Some were critical of the perceived ‘negativity’ of the political campaigning (or ‘slagging off’) they had witnessed.

A minority commented on a perceived lack of canvassers, which older respondents in particular had missed. For this minority, canvassing was perceived to be part of an election campaign, and for some, the personal approach was a way of becoming more engaged with campaigning:

*“Nobody came to the door so you could discuss their policies with them, which I thought was a shame really.” (Male, DE, 61+ years)*

*“Sometimes I would quite like them to come because maybe you have a belief and if someone can convince you, that can be quite refreshing.” (Male, ABC1, 46-60 years old)*

Others who had encountered campaigners on their doorstep did not like this direct approach and did not welcome the opportunity to engage in face-to-face debate:

*“One knocked at the door at 8pm on Sunday which I didn’t appreciate.” (Female, ABC1, 46-60 years)*

*“They asked me who I was going to vote for and I said that was private.” (Female, C2, 61+ years)*

None had sought official advice prior to voting. However, some had discussed issues with their ‘nearest and dearest’, usually family members with strong political opinions. In addition, some had also made an effort to read any leaflets that had been door dropped, information which came directly to them from local candidates.

All had made up their minds who they were going to vote for prior to completing their ballot:

*“I’d made my mind up before I went in there...” (Female, ABC1, 46-60 years old)*

*“I always knew who I was going to vote for.” (Female, C2, 18-25 years old)*

It was clear that voters tended to vote for parties, a decision they felt was based on an assessment of policies, rather than individual candidates. Although voters claimed to be voting on policies, it was clear that tradition also played a key role in the decision-making process:

*“I always vote Labour, always have done.” (Male, C2, 26-45 years old)*

*“I always vote Plaid Cymru. I’m a nationalist.” (Female, C2, 46-40 years old)*

All respondents in Wiltshire had also voted in the County Council election. Interestingly, a minority of respondents in this region felt that their choice of who to vote for in the

County Council election had given them more pause for thought than who to vote for in the General Election:

*“Being a local person, knowing the area, some of the policies made more sense than others, when you know what the area needs.” (Male, DE, 26-45 years)*

However, this potentially higher level of interest was undermined by the perception that the North Wiltshire County Council Election was a foregone conclusion.

Overall, the choice process in both the General Election and North Wiltshire County Council Election did not emerge as a particularly dynamic process. Respondents articulated very little sense of active decision-making. Even so, after voting, respondents felt they could legitimately say they had ‘done their bit’:

*“That’s all I can do.” (Female, ABC1, 46-60 years old)*

*“To be honest I felt really pleased with myself. I felt really satisfied that I had done my bit.” (Male, ABC1, 18-25 years old)*

## **4.2 The Polling Station Experience**

A majority of respondents who voted at polling stations were typically very familiar with the process, always having voted at polling stations in the past. By and large, the polling station environment and process of voting was chosen simply because it was the accepted method of voting: *“It’s just the thing you always do.”*

*“It’s what everyone else does!” (Female, C2 18-35 years old)*

*“When you’ve been voting for 60 years, it’s just a normal procedure.” (Male, C2, 61+ years old)*

However, polling stations were also genuinely considered a very convenient way to vote. Respondents noted the long opening hours which provided the opportunity to vote before and after work. They also reported that polling stations were typically in convenient locations (i.e. within 10 minutes walk). Overall, voting at a polling station emerged as an efficient process, which respondents reported only took a matter of minutes to complete:

*“It’s no hardship is it? It only takes five minutes.” (Male, C2, 26-45 years)*

In addition, some couples (particularly in Chippenham) had made voting at the polling station into something more than simply a functional experience. A number of couples had voted together, combining voting with their leisure time:

*“The polling station was in a function room at the back of the pub, so we went for a drink afterwards!” (Male, DE, 26-45 years)*

*“It’s a nice walk down to the bowls club so we took the dog out and took turns voting.” (Female, ABC1, 46-60 years)*

For a majority of polling station voters, at present, postal voting did not offer any particular advantage over the polling station in terms of accessibility and convenience. Respondents tended to view postal voting as an alternative option:

*“Well I suppose if you know you are going to be away or if you can’t get out for some reason then I might consider it. But it is just as easy to go to the polling station.” (Male, C2, 26-45 years old)*

In the future, younger respondents did not rule out the possibility of voting by post, for logistical reasons (e.g. being out of the country during the voting period) rather than personal preference. Older respondents tended to feel that they would prefer to continue to vote at a polling station, partly due to familiarity and convenience, but also the

reassurance of depositing one's ballot directly into the ballot box. They preferred not leaving anything to chance:

*"I want to see my vote go into the ballot box. Then I know I've done my bit." (Female, DE, 61+ years)*

*"I know then, without a shadow of a doubt, that my cross has gone on the paper and the vote has gone in the box." (Female, ABC1, 46-60 years old)*

When pushed to reflect on the polling station environment, it was only a small minority of male respondents who were willing to look at the environment and the process more critically. One male respondent commented that, on reflection, it was a rather antiquated way of voting:

*"When you think of the society we live in and the technology available, it's a bit old fashioned." (Male, ABC1, 46-60 years)*

Another male respondent who had voted by post agreed that polling stations were rather antiquated, and that postal voting was a more modern approach:

*"Every time I went to vote, you go to some awful church hall, lining up, taking your name... I just thought that was such old hat." (Male, ABC1, 26-45 years old, postal voter)*

Another male respondent remarked that he thought polling stations had a rather 'unofficial' atmosphere:

*"I always feel like it should be in a council office at least." (Male, DE, 26-45 years)*

The majority of polling station voters were satisfied with the way polling station voting worked and did not feel that there was any reason to question or improve the way they

habitually voted. Even if rather antiquated, they thought that the process still worked perfectly satisfactorily:

*“Well what else could there be? They only need a table, a couple of booths and the ballot boxes.” (Female, C2, 46-60 years old)*

In contrast to respondents voting by post, most respondents who voted at polling stations did not have any concerns about the security or secrecy of their vote. Respondents were all satisfied that they had been able to vote in secret. Polling stations were generally not busy places, which meant that confidentiality was maintained:

*“It’s not as if there are crowds there really is it?” (Male, ABC1, 18-25 years, first time voter)*

*“No one can look over your shoulder. It’s all very secure.” (Female, ABC1, 61+ years old)*

It emerged that first time voters had been more concerned than experienced voters about whether the polling station environment would enable them to vote in secret. One first time voter who voted at a polling station had been initially surprised that the booth did not have a curtain. However, she felt that she had been able to vote in privacy. Another first time voter had chosen to vote by post partly due to a concern about being over looked. All her family were going to vote together at the polling station.

Respondents were not concerned about the security of the ballot boxes:

*“Well what could happen? You put your vote in the box and that’s it until it goes to be counted. No one can touch it because the boxes are locked.” (Male, DE, 46-60 years old)*

Some older respondents (61+ years) commented that they recalled a time when there was a policeman at the polling station, overseeing the ballot boxes. Older respondents in Manchester felt that a return to this system would be a good idea, but more as a security measure for the Polling Station Officers and voters rather than security for the ballot boxes themselves:

*“Well round here you just don’t know who you are going to get in there do you? It might be a good idea to have a policeman in there as protection really.” (Female, DE, 61+ years old)*

None had noticed the ballot paper number (on the reverse of the ballot paper), although some had noticed that their ballot papers were stamped. When prompted, it was assumed, without concern, that the ballot paper number was some type of security measure.

### **4.3 Voting at a Polling Station**

All respondents could clearly describe the process of voting at the polling station in detail – from entering the polling station to posting their ballot:

*“It’s all very straightforward. It’s not difficult. You just go in and there’s a lady at the table and she checks your name with your card and then they stamp your ballot paper and give it to you and you take it to the booth, put your cross on it and fold it up and put it in the box. Couldn’t be simpler.” (Male, ABC1, 18-25 years old, first time voter)*

*“You know if you make a mistake it’s going to spoil the paper and not be counted, but you just have to tell them and they will give you another one.” (Male, ABC1, 61+ years)*

For experienced voters, the process of voting at a polling station had become second nature and although infrequent, they hardly gave the experience a second thought:

*“I don’t see how it could be improved. There’s nothing to improve on. It’s fine.”*  
(Female, DE, 61+ years old)

The female first time voter who voted at a polling station had gone with her mum - *“...someone to show her the ropes...”*. However, the male first time voter who voted at a polling station had gone alone, confident that he did not need any assistance, and had managed to vote without any hitches.

Specific recall of the supplementary information varied across the sample, but respondents did not recall actually using any of the supplementary information to assist them in voting. Experienced voters had already internalised the process of how to vote at a polling station, which was perceived to be straightforward. In fact respondents assumed that the process of voting at a polling station was so self-explanatory that everyone would automatically know what to do and that there was no further information that could be offered:

*“I think more or less if you are going to vote you know what you are doing anyway.”*  
(Female, C2, 18-35 years old, first time voter)

*“It’s so simple, I can’t see how you would improve it.”* (Male, C2, 60+ years old)

Despite a general air of confidence about the ease and simplicity of voting at a polling station, some difficulties did emerge. Two female respondents had ticked (rather than crossed) their ballot paper. One was an experienced female voter, aged over 61 years old who realised her mistake, but only after posting her ballot in the ballot box. Her husband told her that she had spoiled her ballot paper. Although ballot papers which have were ticked rather than crossed were counted, some confusion emerged as to whether a tick constituted a spoiled ballot paper:

*“I just hate to think that I’ve wasted it.”* (Female, C2, 61+ years)

This same respondent had also felt rather intimidated by the polling station personnel, whose tone and overall manner she had found rather unfriendly and discouraging. As a result she had begun to wonder how they had achieved their role as Polling Station Officers:

*“It was like they were looking me up and down.” (Female, ABC1, 61+ years old)*

The other respondent who had ticked, rather than crossed her ballot paper was a young 18-25 year old female, first time voter. She had not realised that a cross would be preferable to a tick, despite her mum attending the polling station with her.

Another young male voter in Wiltshire reported that his girlfriend had been rather confused when the Polling Station Officer asked her whether she wanted to vote in one or both elections. She had not been aware that there were two ballots (General Election and County Council Elections). As a result, this voter had only voted in the County Council Election (but had possibly wanted to vote in the General Election). Rather embarrassed, and ‘on the spot’, she had not taken the time to consider what she wanted to do.

In summary, although there was an assumption that voting at a polling station was straightforward and that sufficient information was provided, errors were being made. Those who had made mistakes tended to feel rather foolish, as if they should have known better:

*“The girlfriend had a bit of a blonde moment.” (Male, DE, 26-45 years)*

Although it was only one first time voter who had needed guidance when voting at a polling station for the first time, a further small minority of experienced voters recalled not being completely sure what to do when they had been first time voters. For example, another more experienced young female voter recalled also going to the polling station for the first time with her dad.

The instruction to mark the ballot paper ‘with an X’ needs to be more prominent either on the ballot paper itself, or within the booth. This information needs to be prominent when voters are marking their ballot papers, rather than on a poster in the polling station. A few respondents also felt that step-by-step instructions for the first time voter would be helpful, to make explicit what is currently ‘assumed’ knowledge.

One polling station voter (and another voting by post) suggested that the emphasis on the candidate’s name on the ballot paper should be decreased (currently in the largest type):

*“I’m voting for a party, not a person. I couldn’t give a \*\*\*\* who the person was. In this day and age you are voting for a party, unless you have the odd situation, like an independent.” (Male, ABC1, 26-45 years old)*

This suggestion was based on the idea that the most important piece of information that voters need to recognise is the party for which they are voting.

#### **4.4 The Postal Voting experience**

A majority of those who voted by post at the 2005 General Election had voted by post for the first time. The exception was in Dundee where two respondents had previously voted by post. One respondent had used a postal vote in a European Parliamentary Election, while the other with limited mobility had always opted for a postal vote. Although the June 10<sup>th</sup> 2004 Elections in Manchester were all postal voting, respondents had either not voted, or forgotten that they had voted by post.

Several reasons for voting by post emerged, but common to most postal voters was a need to ensure that they could vote, despite their individual circumstances. Individual circumstances were influenced by working patterns. For example, those working away from home or working throughout the 2005 Polling Day had opted to vote by post:

*“I work shifts and I didn’t know my shifts would work out and I wanted to be sure I could vote.” (Female, ABC1, 18-25 years)*

*“I travel a lot with my work and I knew I was going to be away.” (Male, C2, 26-45 years)*

Those with disabilities (both those with limited mobility and mental health problems) had also opted for a postal vote. For these respondents, postal voting was the most accessible method of voting:

*“I suffer from depression and some days I just can’t get myself out of the house, so I wanted to be sure that I voted because I didn’t know how I would be feeling that day.” (Male, DE, 46-60 years)*

*“It’s a must for me – it’s a real struggle to get to the polling station.” (Female, DE, 26-45 years)*

A majority were therefore voting by post for specific logistical reasons. All wanted to ensure that they could vote, despite not being able to reach the polling station. In fact, of the postal voters sample, only two were voting by post out of preference. One was an older female respondent who preferred the convenience of posting her ballot, rather than walking to the polling station:

*“It’s not far to the polling station, but it just makes it that little bit easier, particularly if it’s raining.” (Female, C2, 61+ years old)*

The other person preferring to vote by post was a first time female voter who preferred the convenience of postal voting, rather than going to the polling station with her entire family, where she was a little concerned about being overlooked:

*“It’s just easier to have it all come to me.” (Female, DE 18-25 years, first time voter)*

In addition, one person claimed to have voted by post by default. He reported that he had been missed off the Electoral Register when he moved house and postal voting had been his only option.

Respondents voting by post (as well as those voting at polling stations) mentioned some concerns regarding the security of postal voting. Firstly, respondents recalled recent publicity regarding fraud in the Midlands. Although unable to cite the details of the story, they were aware that the security of postal voting had been called into question. In reality, respondents wanted to demonstrate that they were aware of the issue, but it was simply a story that had been noted, rather than a situation that was causing any particular personal concern.

Secondly, respondents discussed their concerns about using the postal service as a method of delivering their vote. Overall, the reliability of the Royal Mail was perceived to be a much more practical and relevant issue than allegations of fraud. Due to personal experience of postal delays, many were conscious that (unlike voting at a polling station) they could not be sure whether their vote would reach its destination on time:

*“It is possible that I have gone to the trouble to make sure I can vote and it hasn’t got there – that would be my vote wasted and it would all count for nothing.” (Male, DE, 46-60 years)*

Once again, first time voters were more concerned than more experienced voters. One first time voter had been unsure as to whether she could post her ballot in a post box. Therefore, to ensure that it reached the correct destination, she drove a considerable distance to deliver her ballot to the council offices herself:

*“I didn’t know if I could post it in a normal post box and I wanted to be sure it got there, so I took it to the council offices.” (Female, ABC1, 18-25 years, first time voter)*

There was also a concern raised regarding what happens to postal votes when they reach their destination:

*“It’s not like the ballot boxes which are locked and you know no one can look at them before the count... We just don’t know what happens to them.” (Female, ABC1, 61+ years)*

Ultimately, none of these concerns about postal voting had discouraged respondents from voting by post. Respondents were motivated by ‘wanting to have their say’ and ‘do their bit’, regardless of minor technical concerns.

#### **4.5 Voting by post**

The ballot packs in Camarthen were not felt to be immediately recognisable as ballot packs. The envelope was all white, A4 length and half A4 width. Although an unusual shape, respondents did not feel that the ballot pack envelope was particularly distinct (partly because it lacked any colour or a clear source). Ballot packs in Dundee, Manchester and Wiltshire were all similar – and clearer than the ballot packs from Camarthen. These ballot packs were A5 envelopes with a purple flash and clearly marked ‘Ballot papers inside’.

A majority of those voting by post had voted more or less immediately after receiving their pack. Very few had waited any length of time before completing their postal ballot:

*“I did it straight away because then I was sure it was done.” (Female, ABC1, 18-25 years, first time voter)*

*“I always do things like that straight away otherwise I forget to do them.” (Female, C2, 26-45 years)*

Respondents felt that, when opened, the different elements within the ballot pack (ballot paper, instructions, witness statement and envelopes) were clear and easy to understand. In fact, some had been pleasantly surprised at how easy their ballot had been to complete:

*“It was much easier than I expected. Because it is a government thing you expect the forms to be really long and complicated but it wasn’t.” (Male, C2, 46-60 years)*

*“I told my friends, it’s so straightforward.” (Male, ABC1, 46-60 years old)*

*“This is very good for disabled people – it’s very clear. Anybody who can read can use it. It was very easy to use, every instruction was simple.” (Female, DE, 26-45 years old)*

Inevitably, not everyone read the instructions, but respondents tended to feel that it was ‘obvious’ what they had to do. Only one respondent suggested that the instructions could be improved. He suggested that the order of the instructions should be altered to follow the voter’s progress through the pack (i.e. instructions first, witness statement last):

*“The structure for me would have been better if it had a more logical flow.” (Male, ABC1, 26-45 years)*

A majority of postal voters were comfortable with completing the declaration of identity and the witness statement, which – for most - had not posed any difficulties. The exception was one respondent with limited mobility, for whom completing the witness statement had proved problematic. She had been frustrated that she needed someone to be her witness, and had therefore been reliant on someone else coming to her house before she could post her ballot. Ultimately, she had asked a friend to come over, which she felt had been the only ‘hassle’ in an otherwise straightforward process:

*“I was just thinking all the time – is somebody coming? If you want to post it, you can’t, you have to rely on the other person.” (Female, DE, 26-45 years)*

Ultimately, respondents did not object to completing the declaration of identity and witness statement, although they did wonder whether this was an entirely worthwhile process. They were conscious that it would be very easy to claim to be someone else and therefore tended to feel that it was a rather pointless exercise:

*“Anybody can sign. I really think that’s a waste.” (Male, ABC1, 26-45 years old)*

*“Maybe they should ask for information that only you would know, like your National Insurance Number.” (Female, C2, 26-45 years)*

Overall, respondents who had voted by post in the 2005 General Election felt that they would be prepared to vote by post again in the future. Postal voting had ensured that those who were motivated to vote found a way of doing so, despite logistical difficulties of not being able to reach a polling station on Polling Day:

*“At least this way you don’t need to miss the opportunity to vote.” (Male, DE, 46-60 years)*

A minority felt that they would still prefer to visit the polling station, if they were able, since this method of voting was felt to eliminate any element of uncertainty:

*“You know that your vote had got there and it is going to count with the polling station.” (Female, ABC1, 61+ years)*

It was therefore only a minority who – assuming they could reach the polling station on polling day - felt they would vote by post purely out of convenience (rather than necessity) in the future.

## 4.6 ‘Don’t do politics’ advertising

Respondents were asked their views regarding the television, radio and press executions from the ‘Don’t do politics’ campaign. Their views should be considered in the context that they are not the intended target audience for the campaign.

At the beginning of the interview, respondents were asked if they recalled any advertising about voting. At the end of the interview, respondents were played one of the six ‘Don’t do Politics’ radio executions. After discussion of the radio advert, respondents were played the ‘Don’t Do Politics’ television advert. After discussion of the television advert, the radio advert was played for a second time. Finally, respondents were shown the ‘Don’t Do Politics’ press advert in situ (in a variety of newspapers, both broadsheet and tabloid).

### 4.6.1 *Television advertising*

Two respondents spontaneously recalled the ‘Don’t Do Politics’ television advertising. One was positive about the adverts; the other felt that he had seen the adverts rather too much during the campaign period:

*“I can remember the cartoon with the two men sitting in the pub – that was to get people to vote. That was quite good actually.” (Female, C2, 46-60 years)*

*“I got really sick of that to be honest. I stopped listening because I didn’t really feel they were saying anything to me.” (Male, C2, 26-45 years)*

A majority, when prompted, recalled the television adverts. Overall, respondents were positive about the ‘Don’t Do Politics’ television adverts. The television adverts were rated as the most effective expression of the ‘Don’t Do Politics’ concept. Respondents liked the accessible cartoon ‘everyman’ style and amusing tone of the adverts. They also felt that the television adverts clearly communicated a sound message about voting:

*“The average person doesn’t think that politics affects them. They think it’s distanced or remote. But there were some good points there, like about digging up the road, which does affect you directly. That came across very clearly.” (Male, DE, 26-45 years)*

*“Politics are involved in everything, to some extent, all the way down the line. Everything we do is connected with politics, even though we normally just go on our own sweet way, not thinking about it.” (Female, ABC1, 46-60 years)*

*“It’s saying everything is politics aren’t they? Even the things you don’t think of, like pub opening hours or road works – it’s politics. It affects everyone and if you don’t vote then you can’t complain.” (Male, C2, 26-45 years old)*

When prompted a majority recognised the adverts. They also felt that they – committed voters – were not the intended target audience. Despite not feeling that the adverts were relevant to themselves, they did feel that the adverts communicated a clear message about voting which reflected their own ‘voting ethic’, based on the agreed principle that ‘if you don’t vote you can’t complain’.

#### **4.6.2 Radio advertising**

Two male respondents (when prompted) recalled the ‘Don’t do politics’ radio advertising and both linked the radio adverts to the television adverts. Similarly to those spontaneously recalling the television adverts, their opinions about the radio advertising differed. One ABC1 male respondent felt the advert was clever and engaging:

*You could imagine someone like James Whale doing that.” (Male, ABC1, 46-60 years)*

The other DE male respondent felt that he had heard the advert too much, and that it had just ‘washed over’ him. When prompted, a majority of respondents agreed. They felt that the radio adverts lacked impact, largely because they were perceived as very ‘busy’ i.e. lots of talking in the same tone of voice. As a result, respondents felt that the adverts

would fail to stand out amongst the usual content of radio programmes (which was perceived to be very similar to the content of the adverts themselves):

*“I think it would get lost in the radio programme. You’d just assume it was part of the programme.” (Female, C2, 26-45 years)*

Of the six adverts played, ‘Drawing Pin’ was felt to have most impact. This was mainly due to the difference in format (an expert answering questions on a specific subject, rather than a general phone in format) when compared to the remaining adverts.

Even though this was not the target audience for the advertising (since respondents were already motivated to vote in elections) it was clear that the radio executions were failing to engage their attention. In comparison with the ‘Don’t Do Politics’ television adverts, it was noticeable that it was extremely difficult to encourage respondents to either pay attention to the radio executions, or talk about the radio executions or indeed explain what the radio executions were communicating.

Some respondents did find the executions superficially amusing, but it was only a sophisticated minority of ABC1 respondents who really appreciated the ironic style of the adverts. The style of the adverts lost some older respondents entirely:

*“It was just a load of mumbo jumbo.” (Male, C2, 61+ years)*

*“It’s just people gabbling on, cutting people off. Just silly.” (Female, ABC1, 46-60 years old)*

Despite respondents not wanting to engage with the adverts, when pressed to pay attention, most younger respondents were able to decipher what the radio adverts were saying:

*“People shouldn’t just throw politics to the side – they should take more of an active interest.” (Female, DE, 26-45 years)*

However, the mock chat show structure communicated the ‘Don’t Do Politics’ message in a rather elaborate and complicated way, which confused some:

*“That was a bit strange. He cut the two people off straight away and the person who did get through was talking about something completely insignificant.” (Male, DE, 26-45 years)*

By comparison, the television adverts were viewed as self-explanatory. The visuals and narrative of the TV adverts focus on political issues and the punch line is the irony of one character pointing out that his friend ‘doesn’t do politics’. The focus of the creative in the radio adverts has shifted. The radio executions focus on the punch line established by the television adverts i.e. people not talking about politics. The radio adverts therefore lack the clear focus and self-explanatory structure of the television adverts, which resulted in a lack of interest in the adverts and a lack of engagement with the ‘don’t do politics’ message.

Tonally, the radio adverts were perceived to be saying that non voters are boring, which was perceived as a rather negative approach and unlikely to encourage or persuade apathetic non voters to vote:

*“I think it’s taking it a bit too far – if you don’t do politics you don’t do anything at all.” (Male, DE, 26-45 years)*

*“You are a really boring person with no interests if you don’t vote.” (Female, ABC1, 18-35 years old)*

The majority of these committed voters simply felt that the radio adverts lacked relevance to themselves:

*“If you’re going to vote, you’re going to vote; if you’re not, you’re not.” (Female, C2, 18-25 years old)*

Only one respondent felt offended, feeling that the radio adverts were suggesting that he 'didn't do politics', an implication he personally resented:

*"I think for people who are less intelligent, this might work. People who read The Times are not going to need this sort of message."* (Male, ABC1, 26-45 years old)

#### **4.6.3 Press advertising**

Although all read a paper on a regular basis, only one respondent recalled the press advert when prompted. He felt that the whole page advert with lots of white space had created an impact. In general, respondents felt that the advert would have had more impact if it was in colour. The black and white line drawing was necessarily felt to have limited impact, particularly in the context of colour, tabloid formats:

*"No I don't remember seeing this. Well it doesn't stand out very much does it?"*  
(Female, ABC1, 18-25 years old)

Respondents also suggested that the advert would have had more impact if it had been placed on the right hand side of the page.

The message communicated by the advert was clear – the 'don't sit on the fence' metaphor was immediately recognised and understood. However, there were concerns that the ironic style of the advert, particularly in terms of the text, was too sophisticated, 'too tongue in cheek' for the target audience. These concerns stemmed from the text, which after a series of statements about not having a view culminates with the line 'definitely, definitely don't vote':

*"I think they have just been a bit too clever for their own good. Your average Sun reader isn't going to understand that."* (Male, C2, 26-45 years)

*“They’re saying don’t sit on the fence aren’t they? But it’s a bit too complicated I think.” (Female, ABC1, 18-35 years old)*

Reactions to the strength of the tone adopted varied. Some felt that a strong call to action was warranted and supported the idea of encouraging people to ‘have a view’:

*“It’s telling you to get off your backside and go down and vote.” (Female, C2, 61+ years)*

Equally, some committed voters were concerned about the perceived negativity of the approach (and the danger of using irony):

*“Definitely, definitely don’t vote is so negative.” (Male, ABC1, 26-45 years)*

Similarly to reactions to the radio adverts, some committed voters felt that a more positive approach would be more effective in encouraging people to vote. This alternative approach mirrored respondents’ own reasons for voting – positively wanting to take part.

Once again, this group of committed voters did not feel that the press advert was aimed at themselves.

#### **4.7 The Electoral Commission**

Several respondents claimed to have heard of The Electoral Commission and were aware that they were an independent body designed to oversee the election process and to encourage people to vote.

Those who had not heard of The Electoral Commission thought that the adverts were produced by the ‘government’ in its broadest non-party political sense:

*“I expect it is produced by the government...no, not that Labour government, but just the government generally – to encourage people to vote.” (Female, ABC1, 18-25 years old)*

Overall, the advertising campaign was perceived to be coming from an independent source.