

ELECTORAL COMMISSION REPORT

THE FUTURE OF VOTING



The
Electoral
Commission

REVEALING REALITY

Table of contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Executive summary | 3 |
| Background and methodology | 5 |
| Section 1: What do people want voting to be like | 8 |
| Section 2: What are people's current voting attitudes and behaviours? | 12 |
| Section 3: What could be improved about the experience of casting a vote? | 21 |
| Section 4: What are people's information needs whilst voting? | 34 |
| Conclusion | 48 |
| Annex | 53 |



Executive summary

The Electoral Commission commissioned this project to explore public attitudes and needs around information and modernisation in the act of casting a vote. It sought to understand what information members of the public want and need about elections, and public attitudes to different ways of being able to cast their vote. By doing so, it hoped to inform a voting process that works for all audiences.

People valued elements of the voting process that made it feel significant

When talking to people about voting, a large proportion of participants saw ‘increasing turnout’ as something that was important. Throughout the fieldwork, ensuring ease and accessibility of voting tended to be the first things that people talked about so that more people would be likely to vote.

Whilst this was often the first thing they mentioned, other priorities then emerged which suggested a more complex picture. People expressed a range of concerns about what could be lost if the act of casting their vote changed, including losing a sense of social connection, a sense of shared purpose, or a sense of celebration. And as one participant put it, if voting became as simple as swiping left or right on Tinder, would people think about the act of voting or their decision of who to vote for as much?

People wanted a system that encourages more people to vote. In order to encourage people to think beyond their initial reaction, we asked, *what if that included people turning up at the polling station and flipping a coin to make their decision?*

When faced with this, most respondents reflected that what they really meant by wanting more people to vote was in fact wanting more people to care about voting. Changes to the system that encouraged people to vote but didn’t encourage proper engagement with this decision were seen as potentially undermining the significance of voting. Making it easier and accessible for all was only seen as positive when it would be accompanied by true consideration of voting decisions.

There are opportunities for both ease and engagement to be supported through innovations around information and the way the voting experience is designed.

Summary of findings

What are people’s current voting attitudes and behaviours?

Most people in the sample felt that voting was important for a number of reasons. However, not everyone always voted in every election. People fell into a variety of mindsets when voting – ranging from being actively disengaged to enthusiastically engaging with campaigning around politics and elections. People’s motivation and mindset also varied depending on the type of election.

What could be improved about people’s experience of casting a vote?

Overall, people found the current methods of voting straightforward, especially once they had voted a couple of times and were familiar with the process. In-person voting was the default and preferred option across the sample, and postal voting was mainly used in situations where people could not get to the polling station or were following their parents’ tradition. For those who had only voted in polling stations, postal voting was perceived to take more effort and be less reliable than in-person voting. However, everyone valued that there were different methods available as, above all, people wanted everyone to be able to vote – including those people with additional needs.

When reflecting on potential modernisation options, innovations that made voting quick, convenient, and physically accessible were most attractive. However, there was a tension between wanting voting to be easy for all and not losing the things people valued. These were:

- A sense of community and shared purpose
- The social and celebratory experience
- Being 'seen' voting
- Showing commitment and civic duty
- A feeling of control, confirmation and security

In summary, people wanted voting to feel convenient, quick and accessible for all, but they also needed reassurance that it would be secure and, most importantly, feel significant.

What are people's information needs whilst voting?

Overall, people understood *how* to vote, except for a small number of people who had not yet voted. Most felt like information provision in this area was sufficient.

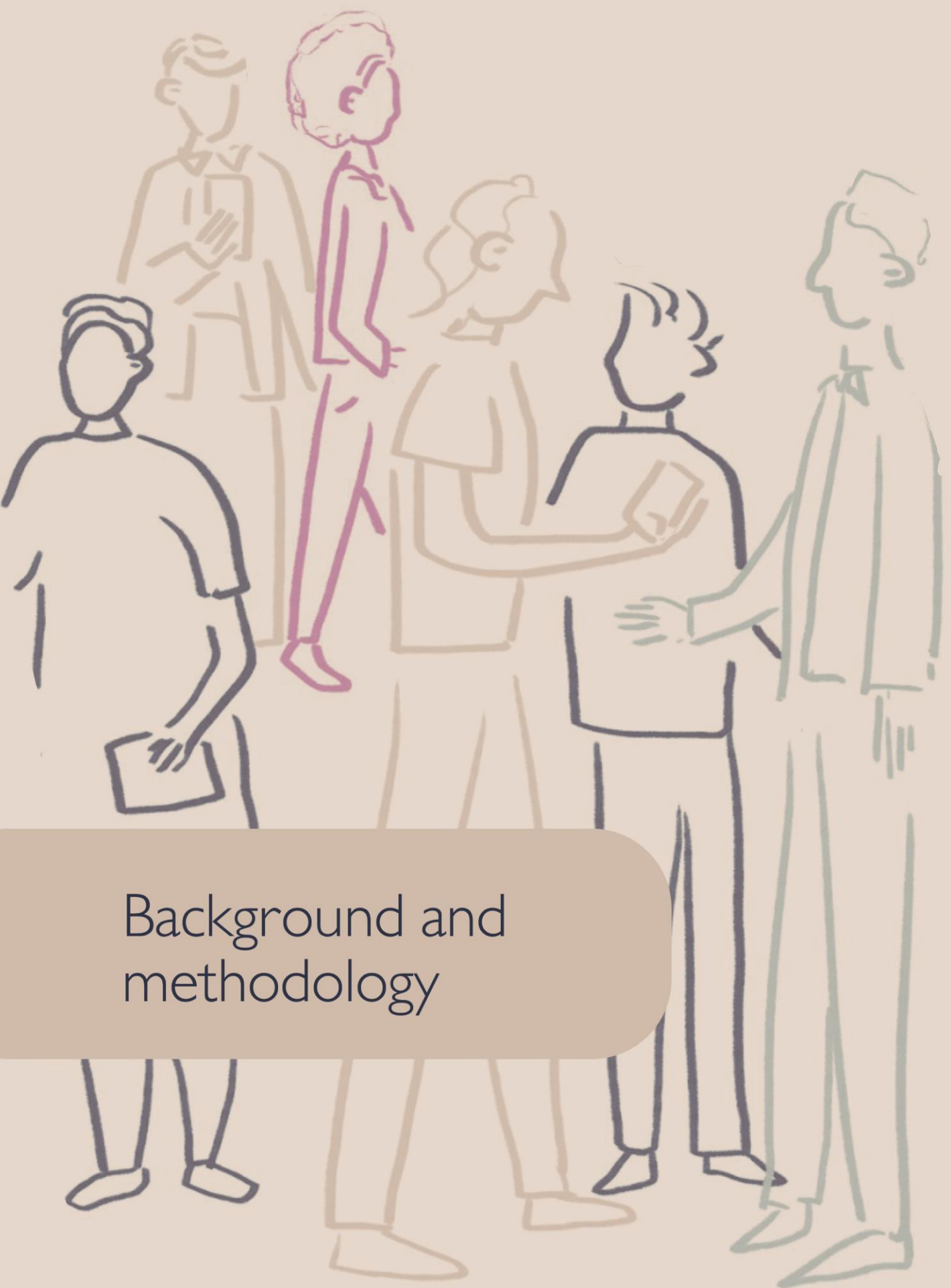
One barrier to voting was that some people – usually less engaged voters – were not always aware elections were happening. In addition to this, there were some larger challenges around:

- Knowing *why* it is important to vote
 - This was linked to understanding the value of every single vote, how votes are counted and winners elected, and which issues are influenced/decided by the candidates being elected.
- Knowing *how* to make an informed decision
 - Though many people were searching for information around policies and standpoints, how much candidates can be trusted, and the character or personality of candidates, they sometimes found it hard to access or process this information.

These challenges sometimes prevented people from voting, even though they practically knew how to cast their vote.

People also often said the information available was 'overwhelming'. This had different meanings for different people. Some didn't know where to start searching, others were unsure how to identify sources they could trust, and others lacked confidence in analysing information to make a decision.

Opportunities around information provision could include more motivational information around voting, signposting information more effectively or supporting people to evaluate which sources are trustworthy.



Background and methodology

Background and methodology

The Electoral Commission is the independent body responsible for maintaining standards in local and General Elections. As part of their objective to promote public confidence and improve the integrity of the electoral process in the UK they have set out four strategic goals, one of which is the need for knowledge and insight into the public's attitudes, perspectives and needs towards elections for effective policy and service design.

To fully understand people's experiences and perspectives around the process of casting a vote, we conducted a large-scale qualitative project with a diverse sample covering all four nations, including 16-17-year-olds in Scotland and Wales and those with accessibility needs.

The two areas of focus for this project, modernisation and information needs, are both key elements to ensuring the successful implementation of an election process that works well for all audiences.

This research has created a useful bank of rich evidence about what people think about the current voting process and what can be done to improve their experience. Therefore it has the potential to help to inform evidence-led decision making, whilst driving empathy and understanding.

Objectives

Specific Information objectives include:

- To identify what information the public wants about elections, voting and politics
- To examine why people want this information, and what would change if they had it
- To explore what information is most important to different groups of people
- To understand how people assess whether information is good information
- To understand the importance to people of the source of any information

Specific Modernisation objectives include:

- To identify what the public think about the current ways people can cast their vote at elections in the UK
- To understand what is important to people when they vote
- To understand what would improve people's voting experience
- To explore what people think about proposed alternative ways of being able to cast their vote, and why they may prefer some options over others
- To understand whether there are differences in views and opinion by demographic or voting method

Methodology

In order to uncover useful insight into the UK's attitudes and needs in elections, the diversity and breadth of the UK needed to be covered. To do this, we conducted 50 focus groups, 48 depth interviews and 15 follow up interviews, speaking to over 300 people about their voting experiences.

The research covers ages 16–85, a range of socio-economic groups, urban and rural locations across the four nations, the disenfranchised and the highly engaged, those who have voted all their lives and those who have never voted before, as well as spanning the political spectrum.

The research also ensured representation from those with health needs, such as physical disabilities, hearing / visual impairments and mental health issues. It also included non-internet users and participants with low digital confidence.

Throughout this report, unless specified, the findings were common across the sample. Where the term 'people' is used, it refers to the whole sample. Where findings are unique to a particular group or demographic, this is made clear.

Refer to annex for more detail on the methodology and sample.





SECTION I

What do people want
voting to be like?

What do people want voting to be like?

At first, people said that increasing voter turnout was key and thought voting should be made as quick and easy as possible. However, on further reflection, participants actually wanted other people to also *care* about voting. Making voting too easy could undermine the significance that people associated with it. These two elements – ease and motivation to vote – need to be carefully balanced in any innovations made to the voting process.

Most people said that increasing turnout was key – this was often linked to making the process easier or giving people more options

Participants who already voted – whether they were highly engaged or not – wanted as many people to vote as possible and felt it was important to increase voter turnout. For this reason, people across the sample favoured having options that made the voting process quick, easy and accessible.

However, there were other things apart from ease that people valued about the experience – these were the more emotional aspects of the voting experience

Although ease was often the first thing people mentioned, other more emotional elements of the voting experience that people valued were mentioned again and again across the sample.

These were elements such as:

- feeling a sense of purpose
- feeling a sense of occasion
- feeling like you are investing effort and doing something worthwhile
- feeling like voting is a collective experience

Together, these elements made voting feel more significant to voters.

When people thought about it more, they didn't want voting to be so easy that people voted without *thinking* about it

When asked to reflect, most voters wanted others to *care* about voting. They wanted people to think about their decision, rather than voting aimlessly or without purpose. Although they initially said that everyone should vote, it became clear that this idea was more complex than it appeared.

When asked about a scenario in which people turned up to vote, but just voted randomly or flipped a coin in order to make their decision, the more engaged voters reacted negatively. They wanted people to feel that voting was significant, to value the experience, and to take it seriously. This scenario pushed some people to say that they would rather less people voted if those that did had actually thought about their vote.

More engaged voters who cared about voting began to identify some problems with voting being as easy and accessible as possible. First, it could remove those elements mentioned above that people valued about the voting experience, thereby undermining the significance placed on voting and the voting experience. Second, there was a risk that the people who were more disengaged with voting and elections would put less consideration into who they were voting for.

Therefore, although people did initially want voting to be easy to increase voter turnout, upon discussion, they placed equal importance on people's consideration of their vote.

The main reason for people not voting was not because they found it too hard, but because they felt that their vote wouldn't be significant, or they didn't know who to vote for

It is true that some disengaged people and non-voters didn't vote because they perceived voting to be 'too hard'. This stemmed from a lack of understanding of how to vote or a feeling that it was simply too much effort.

However, the biggest barriers to voting were in fact disengagement with politics or feeling that voting was insignificant and not going to bring about any change. People with these views were often young or of a lower SEG. Their reasons included not feeling like they could make a difference to the outcome of an election, lacking a strong opinion, not knowing enough about the options of who to vote for and, for people in other nations, feeling like politics were England-centric.



To increase engagement with voting both motivation to engage with voting and the ease of casting a vote should be considered

There is a need to strike the right balance between making voting easy to encourage disengaged people to participate, whilst ensuring voting still feels significant to all.

Making the process easier is the most obvious thing to do, but making people care is what engaged voters actually wanted when probed. When people are asked about how the voting experience could be improved, people default to saying it should be made easier, as it is harder for people to think about how to make people care about voting.

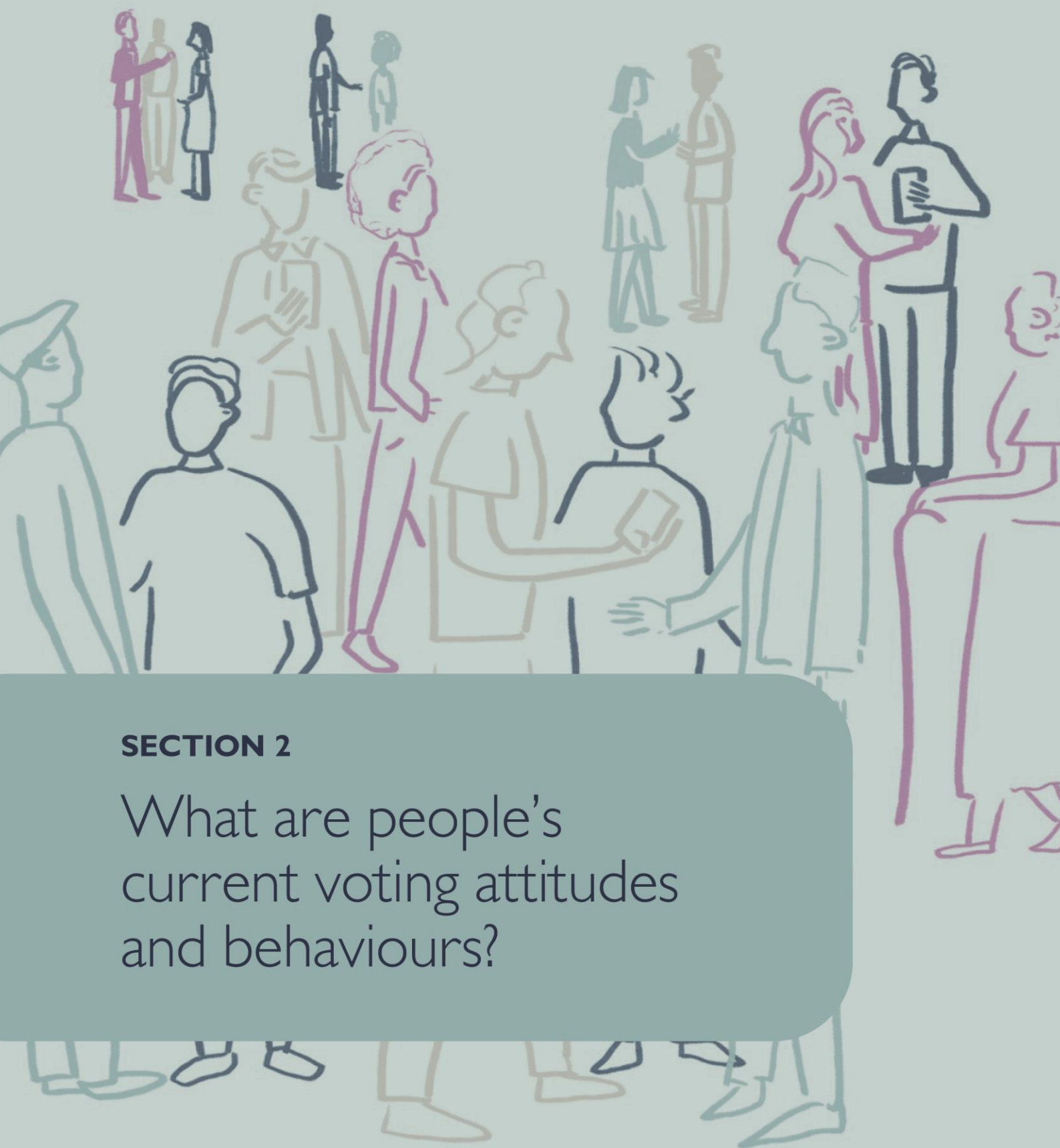
If something is easier, people may not engage with it as deeply, and they may not think as critically about the task. It is recognised elsewhere that a disadvantage of frictionless design can be that people make less considered decisions¹.

In addition, there is a potential risk that increasing ease could reduce people's motivation, as making voting *too* easy could reduce the significance of voting. There is the chance that motivated voters would begin to think that large numbers of people would be voting with little thought, and as a result, may no longer feel motivated to vote. Although there would be more people *voting*, they would not be *caring* about the experience or their decision about who to vote for, which would diminish the significance of the electoral process for the most engaged voters.

In summary, whilst ease is important, motivating people to vote is also a big consideration. Future changes should take into consideration that making the voting and thinking process *too* easy could undermine how significant some people think voting is.

Both ease and motivation can be supported through innovations around the way the voting experience is designed (modernisation) and the information people receive.

¹ For example, <https://www.fca.org.uk/publication/corporate/woolard-review-report.pdf>



SECTION 2

What are people's
current voting attitudes
and behaviours?

What are people's current voting attitudes and behaviours?

Most people say that it is important to vote, but not everyone does. There are different factors that influence the mindset that people have towards voting – including their engagement and confidence with politics, their attitude towards different types of election and their previous experiences of voting.

Most people said it was important to vote

All participants in the research were asked how important voting was to them and what motivated them to vote. When first asked, most people stressed the importance of voting.

People were motivated by different reasons for voting. These motivations can be categorised as extrinsic or intrinsic. Extrinsic motivations align with feeling that they should vote, or a social pressure to vote. The intrinsic motivations were more personal and emotional, and often felt by the more engaged voters.

The most commonly cited reasons included:

“You can't complain if you don't vote”

This was the most common answer given by all voters. When they said this, people were often talking about politics, the outcome of elections and the general running of the country. A similar idea was that people couldn't discuss or partake in politics if they didn't vote. This was heard across all age groups, socio-economic groups and nations across the sample.

“I think if you haven't put a vote in for something, you can't really discuss any political issues that affect you... I kind of have to vote otherwise I don't really feel like I have an opinion on anything”
Group, 26-40, England

“Women fought for the vote” - mention of the suffrage movement or political history

Many felt that they needed to take up their vote as people had fought for it in the past. This was particularly true for women, and for those in Northern Ireland.

“For me especially as a woman, especially due to struggle to get the vote, it's particularly important to vote... Why did they go through all that pain?”
Group, 18-25, England

“I'm well aware of what women suffered for women to be able to vote, so I would never knowingly not vote”
Nora, 70+, England

Civic duty - a right to vote and to be part of being a democracy

Many people across the groups cited civic duty as a reason for voting. However, less engaged voters often didn't expand on their motivations beyond a feeling of a *duty* to vote. Some respondents felt that voting itself was a civic duty, but others felt that having the *choice* to vote or not was their civic duty and right.

Seeing voting as a civic duty and part of being a democracy was more common among younger people with a lower SEG background, and adults and elderly people from higher SEG.

"I think it is an important civic duty that we have... that we are lucky enough to live in a democracy. That we are lucky enough that we are able to choose the people that make decisions about us. If you don't have democratic responsibility and choice then I don't think the society you live in is any good"

Group, 18-25, Scotland

"It's a democratic right to vote, as a citizen it's a right to vote, and it's a part of a civic duty to either vote or choose not to vote"

Group, 61+, England

Having your say or making your voice heard

Similarly, many people described feeling a sense of agency and being able to have a role in making a difference. This was mentioned regularly across all nations, ages and SEGs. However, it was more prevalent in young adults from higher SEGs, and older adults from lower SEGs. Some, particularly younger people and those with ties to particular groups or communities such as migrants, were motivated by shaping particular issues that would affect them personally. These included policies affecting education and the LGBTQ and BAME communities.

"You vote for your voice to be heard as a single person – you like to have your views heard but obviously you're not able to other than the ballot"

Group, 61+, Scotland

"It's important to vote because then underrepresented groups are then able to have their say and get their point across, it's important that their voices are also heard"

Group, 26-40, England



Parents were motivated by the thought of improving their children's current and future lives

Some parents, particularly those in the 26-40 age bracket and from England, said that they were disinterested in voting when younger, but had engaged more since having children and becoming aware that they could relevant policy.

“For me, it's just thinking about my son's future. If I didn't vote and the future for him didn't look good, and I didn't put my view across then I think I'd feel pretty rubbish. At least if you take part, you can say that you've had your say – even if it doesn't go your way, at least you can say you've done your bit and you've voted”

Group, 26-40, England

“As I've gotten older I've realised it's a lot more important to vote... I thought more about my son's schooling and healthcare, and things that come with who you get when they're elected, so it's very important to get somebody who you want and what you believe in”

Group, 26-40, England

The Covid-19 pandemic acted as a trigger to vote for some younger people, and for some who were previously disengaged

Covid-19 had made some people more aware of the importance of voting because they could clearly see how the decisions of politicians impacted their daily lives.

“Before Covid many people might not have seen a political debate but now everyone tunes in because it determines about what they are allowed to do”

Group, 18-25, Scotland

There were some reasons for voting, mostly relating to democracy and governance, that people didn't talk about. People didn't mention voting as a way of holding politicians to account, its role in democratic legitimacy or the fact that enough people should vote to make the vote representative of most people's views. There was also no mention of voting as a way to feel strong relationship between their government (i.e. feeling it's your government).

A small number of the most engaged or knowledgeable voters did mention these things in vague terms, for example voting being an important part of democracy.

People showed different mindsets towards voting

Despite most people initially saying it was important to vote, it was evident that not everybody was voting – or not voting in every election.

Throughout the course of the research, different voting mindsets were identified. These ranged from being actively disengaged with voting to actively engaging with campaigning around politics and elections.

People's levels of engagement, their decisions to vote or not vote, and their reasons for this, varied greatly. As explained below, these mindsets can also change with the type of election. Generally, the more engaged voters were, the more personal their motivations for voting.

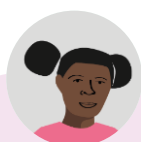
These voting mindsets will be referred to throughout this report to draw out similarities and differences between different types of voters and their attitudes about voting.

1) 'I immerse myself in politics and voting'

These people were often passionate about voting and engaged closely with politics, regardless of whether there was an upcoming election. Some of these voters actively took part in politics, for example through campaigning, attending events or having party membership. Others were more intellectually invested, conducting extensive research into their vote by reading manifestos and consulting multiple information sources.

These voters all felt that voting was very important, and that people should be informed and care about who or what they were voting for.

People who had this mindset were often young professionals (late 20's), those of a higher SEG, and those in the devolved nations (especially in relation to national elections such as Scottish parliament).



“ Every vote is a vote for change and every non-vote stops potential change ”

“ I make it my duty to vote ”
Lottie, 28
Wales

Lottie feels voting is extremely important and an opportunity for change. She has always encouraged her family to vote and shares election-related information with them.

She feels it's very important that politicians make their language more accessible to young people so as to make politics more inclusive.

Lottie consults a variety of online sources, podcasts and radio, and also posts about politics on social media. She also downloads the candidate manifestos and checks these against what they say on TV. After elections, she tracks the results and turnout.

2) ‘I want to be informed enough to cast my vote’

These voters were motivated by external factors which make them feel that they should vote, as well as by more personal motivations, thinking about issues that affect their daily lives, such as healthcare. They engaged mostly with the mainstream information outputs around elections, such as the news, and didn’t tend to conduct extensive research on their decision, unlike those above who immersed themselves in politics.

They said that it was important to vote and talked about increasing voter turnout. Some thought that everyone should vote, regardless of how informed they were, but others felt people should be more informed before they vote.

People who had this mindset were typically younger people and people of a lower SEG.



“ I don’t stay on top of it [previous results], I’m just here for the now ”

“ What’s the point in voting if you don’t know who to vote for? ”

Jaseena, 27
Wales

Jaseena is from England but lives in Wales. She votes in every UK and Welsh general election, but has never voted in a local election, as she never hears about them. She likes going to the polling station as a family with her husband and baby daughter.

Jaseena mainly gets information from party leaflets and news websites. She usually goes to the parties’ websites to read their policies and she also has conversations with her extended family.

3) ‘I should vote’

These people were motivated by external factors rather than a strong desire to vote. They tended to care less about their decision, as a result engaging less with information around elections. They also voted irregularly, as they were more easily put off by factors that make the process more difficult or inconvenient, such as poor weather. These voters were also more likely to copy how others, such as family members, voted.

People across all demographics felt this way. For example, some younger people who were less invested in politics still felt they should vote, and some older people were voting as it had become a routine act that they felt they should do.



“ I just go and vote. No major significance for me ”

“ If I happen to be too busy, I wouldn’t go. It’s not my priority ”

Jim, 52
Scotland

Jim does vote but doesn’t see doing so as a particularly important event. He wouldn’t vote if the weather was poor, the roads were bad or if he was too busy with work. Jim is more interested in referendums and when the vote is about issues he cares about.

He wants voting to involve as little effort as possible.

4) ‘I’ve never voted but I want to’

Some people who had never voted before had this mindset, most often because they were young and were not yet eligible. They often took an interest in voting and some viewed it as a rite of passage. As new voters, they commonly lacked confidence and tended to be interested in information on who or what to vote for.

People who had this mindset were typically younger people, especially those aged 16-17 in the devolved nations, and were often of a higher SEG.



“ I won’t vote at this age, maybe in a few years. I don’t want to go and vote for what I think it is right without researching it ”

Tim, 17
Wales

Tim is in 6th form and hasn’t yet voted. He sees voting as important because of its bearing on the future of the country.

Though Tim can vote in the upcoming Welsh Parliament elections he feels he needs to educate himself more first, particularly around the differences between candidates and ‘how it works’.

5) ‘I’m confused, disinterested and lacking confidence’

When people had this mindset, they didn’t vote because they felt they didn’t understand the electoral system or how to vote. This lack of understanding created a lack of confidence when it came to voting, and made them disengaged and disinterested in participating because they didn’t see the value or significance of their singular vote. These people also lacked motivation to vote as they were not driven by a particular party or policy, or struggled to decide who to vote for.

People who had this mindset were often younger people or new voters. People from the devolved nations sometimes felt this way when voting in the UK elections.



“ If people like me who really don’t have a clue voted for something for the sake of it, and then it went the wrong way... why bother? I just leave it for the people who think they know ”

Rhianne, 25
Scotland

Rhianne has never voted as she doesn’t think it has an impact. She feels she doesn’t know anything about voting or politics, so there isn’t much point in voting.

In the Scottish referendum, she didn’t know enough about why she would vote ‘yes’ or ‘no’, and she generally feels she can’t connect the things she cares about to parties or policies.

6) ‘I choose not to vote’

These people were actively disenfranchised and chose not to vote. They were often engaged with politics and information around elections, but made the choice *not* to vote in all or some elections. Their reasons for not voting included:

- Not trusting politicians
- Not feeling change will come as a result of elections, or that other methods of campaigning may be more effective (e.g. protests)
- Feeling like voting won’t make a difference – both on personal and wider local and national levels. This could be a feeling that their individual vote wouldn’t make a difference to the outcome of the election, or a feeling that nothing would change as a result of the election. This included people whose constituency was a stronghold for a particular party, or had the same MP for multiple years.

People who had this mindset were often older people who were often more locally-focused and people in the devolved nations, as they felt that voting in UK general elections in particular wasn’t as impactful for them.



“ They [politicians] just ignore us. We're just the little person and they don't like us. There aren't enough of us to make a difference... My one little vote won't make a difference ”

Lilian, 64
England

Lilian chose not to vote in general elections for 8 years. She lives in a small town and feels that no politicians or parties care about her community. She also feels politicians can't be trusted and that her vote won't make a difference.

She feels isolated from the political process as no leaflets or canvassers come to her door. As a result, she feels like she isn't given enough information to inform herself.

Motivation and mindset sometimes varied depending on the type of election

People did not always fit into one single mindset, as their motivation varied depending on the type of election (e.g. whether it was a local, general election, referendum or other election). For example, some voters chose to vote in general but not local elections.

Overall, most people, particularly in England, felt that UK Parliamentary elections and referendums were the most important. However, a small number of people, particularly the elderly, felt that local elections were more important as they focused on issues that they cared about, and their impact was more tangible. Similarly, some people in the devolved nations often felt that their national and local elections were more important than UK Parliamentary elections, as these felt 'England-centric'.

For example, people might have the 'I want to be informed enough to cast my vote' and 'I should vote' mindsets in those elections that they feel are more important, but have the 'I choose not to vote' mindset for other elections.

"General elections are more important as they're about the bigger issues that affect the whole country"

Group, 26-40, England

"In the general elections they all just try and promise too much that they can't necessarily deliver, whereas the local elections are for more small things in the area that are more of interest and more doable"

Eloise, 56, England

"It depends on the election - If it's a local council election, I'm not going to get excited about it. But if it's independence or Brexit referendum, you'll keep an eye on the news, hour by hour"

Group, 61+, Scotland

In summary, most people felt voting was important. People fit broadly into six mindsets when voting, encompassing different levels of knowledge and care about voting. Across these mindsets, people had varying motivations – some felt more personally and strongly than others. However, people's mindsets shift as their motivations ebb and flow according to the type of election.



SECTION 3

What could be improved about the experience of casting a vote?

What could be improved about the experience of casting a vote?

In this part of the research, we discussed the current voting methods with respondents before introducing a range of remote and in-person modernisation options. We used visual stimulus to introduce people to these new options and asked them to consider the advantages and disadvantages of each. The options we considered were:

- Remote: online voting, text voting, all-postal voting
- In-person: voting electronically in the polling station, alternative polling stations, choosing where to vote, weekend voting, advance voting, mobile polling stations

When we spoke to people about the current voting options, they generally felt voting was simple and could pinpoint little to change about the process. It was important to them for people with all types of needs to be able to vote – or at least have options for voting – and they often considered the needs of other demographics and people with additional needs. Therefore, when we introduced alternative options, those that made voting easier and more accessible were appealing. However, upon further discussion, it became clear that there were parts of the current voting process that respondents valued highly, and they became concerned about losing these aspects of the voting experience.

Reflections on the current voting experience

Overall, people found the current methods fairly straightforward

People found the current methods simple and effective. Many had been voting for such a long time that it felt second nature to them. People felt once you knew how to vote using any of the methods available, it was fairly straightforward, and there was no evidence of anyone not being able to vote via their chosen method.

Most people struggled to think of how the current voting method could be improved. This was partly due to how infrequently people vote, as it wasn't an everyday experience for them.

"It's very simplistic, it's almost a bit too basic in a way but that's a good thing, all I think is 'I've got a card, I just have to turn up with it and give it to someone'"

Group, 26-40, England

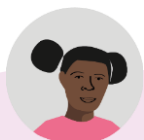
"The polling station is a 2-minute walk, and voting is as easy as anything"

Danny, 42, Scotland

In-person voting was the default and preferred option

Nearly all the sample that voted had done so in-person, and this was seen as the default option. The reason it was preferred was likely due to familiarity – this was how people had always voted in the past.

However, particular groups of people did have some criticisms of aspects of the in-person experience. Those with mental health issues and learning difficulties did not always prefer in-person voting. For some with mental health issues, the polling station being busy was a concern. They found it being busy stressful, and so would prefer polling stations to be more quiet. For a few people, this meant that they preferred to vote using other methods, such as postal voting. Some people with learning difficulties felt they needed a description or summary of what to do and what would happen at the polling station, as they struggled with unknown environments. They also wanted to be able to identify someone at the polling station who could offer support in case they needed extra help.



“ They could give people a run through of how it's going to work if that's an issue with some people... It could come with your polling card... Or an advert on a Facebook video or a nice cartoon ”

“ If people need more support, when they give you your ballot paper they can say, 'if you need any help, ask' ”

**Charity, 20
England**

Charity has autism and suffers from depression and anxiety. The first time she went to the polling station, she was nervous about what to expect.

As she went with her boyfriend, she copied what he did, but she would have been more nervous and unsure of what to do if she was alone. She feels staff could offer support.

She would appreciate a 'run through' of how voting would work in video form or with the poll card.

A minority of the sample reported that they found the polling station intimidating or too formal. This was particularly common among younger people (especially those who hadn't voted before) and disengaged voters, who expressed concerns about “being watched” and worried the polling station would be a “pressurising” environment.

Some younger people felt the polling station didn't feel special and was anti-climactic. This was partly because they had been told the act of voting was an important moment, and so had built up an expectation around the voting experience. When they were able to vote, they found the stations to be underwhelming.

“I was underwhelmed when I first voted. I didn't expect them [polling stations] to be glamorous but they're quite grubby... it happens quickly, and then it's over”

Group, 18-25, England

In Northern Ireland, some older people raised concerns over the location of polling stations. Some respondents felt that their assigned polling station was difficult to access, or that they could have been assigned to one closer by. Some people also felt that polling stations were in locations with different politics or religious views, which they would be uncomfortable visiting.

“I was a bit apprehensive and uncomfortable because over here you can be the wrong religion for that polling station”

Sean, 55, Northern Ireland

People from Northern Ireland were also more reluctant to use postal or proxy voting. It should be noted that, unlike in Great Britain, in Northern Ireland you can only vote using alternative methods if you provide an acceptable reason, so people often didn't see them as an option.

Postal voting was perceived to take more effort and be less reliable than in-person voting

For those who were used to going to the polling station, there was a preconception that postal voting would not be as easy as in-person voting. When explored in more detail, people's perception of the process being 'more complicated' was triggered by the cognitive effort involved in having to plan in advance (i.e. applying, registering, providing some evidence in the case of some nations), rather than the actual physical effort.

However, postal voting sometimes did demand more physical effort for people in rural areas across all nations, as they often didn't have post boxes nearby and had to drive to post their vote.

This experience differed for some people with mental health issues. Some people with depression and chronic illness felt the postal vote gave them the security that if they were having a "low day" they would still be able to vote. A few people with anxiety preferred communicating with people in other forms than face to face, which made the postal vote more appealing.

Those with physical disabilities largely opted for postal voting over going to the polling station because of the difficulties of arranging travel there. They also had anxieties around whether there would be disabled access. However, they still faced difficulties with the postal vote such as remembering that they had to get it in early or having to rely on someone to get them to a post box. They often felt excluded and that current methods were not accessible to them – some felt excluded by postal voting as they wanted the social experience of the polling station, and disliked the idea of proxy voting as it took away their independence.

"[The postal vote] comes quite early so you need to be organised to do it and get it in on time. For example organising for my husband to take it to the post box on the way to work or someone to take me to the post box. It'd be good if you could have someone from the council who could come and collect it"

Group with physical disabilities

"I wouldn't do a proxy vote because I like the fact I can tick a box. I still have the capacity at the moment... for someone to take that away from me... I don't want that"

Group with physical disabilities

Among those who hadn't voted by post before, there was a general sense of mistrust and concern over postal voting. Based on previous experiences, people perceived the postal service as unreliable and were concerned that their votes would not reach the local authority and therefore wouldn't be counted. When asked, a minority of the respondents worried about the risk of postal votes being intercepted or destroyed. There was also a feeling of 'incompleteness' around posting your vote, as opposed to putting it in the ballot box where it would be counted along with hundreds of other votes.

However, it was also apparent that people hadn't considered the security of the voting method they were currently using. During the groups, a few people began to question how secure the process of counting ballot papers was, but the majority still felt it was more secure than postal voting. This was because they could physically see their vote going into the ballot box, and they had heard anecdotal stories about items getting lost in the post.

"There's a lot of paperwork in a postal vote pack, sometimes it feels a bit overkill. It is a wee bit of faffing"

Group, 26-40, Scotland

"Postal voting is too open to manipulation. That worries me, I don't like it. I'd prefer to have a way more secure system"

Group, 26-40, England

"The number of times I've lost things in the postal service, I'd rather go in and know that my vote will actually be counted"

Group, 18-25, Wales

Above all, people wanted everyone to be able to vote, including different demographics and people with additional needs

The majority of people were aware of the needs of people with additional needs or from different demographics. For example, older people reflected on what would make the experience better for younger people and vice-versa. Everyone agreed there needed to be options for voting, to ensure those with additional needs could vote, because they were concerned about everyone being able to vote.

“It should be accommodating to different needs, different days and different times to make sure everyone can vote”

Group, 26-40, England

“You need to offer options for different types of people – more remote options and assurance that these methods are legitimate”

Group 26-40, Northern Ireland

Reflections on modernisation options

During fieldwork we presented different modernisation options to prompt people’s reflections. We included visuals about each of these and discussed the pros, cons, and any other aspects that people felt were important to consider. The ideas we explored were: online voting, text voting, e-voting, alternative polling stations, all postal, choosing where to vote, weekend voting, advance voting, and mobile polling stations.

Innovations that made voting quick, convenient and physically accessible were attractive

Considering that the majority of people thought that voting was very important, and they thought it should be accessible for people with different needs and conditions, options that made voting easier tended to be popular.

At first, people wanted voting to be quick and to only require a small investment of time and effort; online voting was particularly appealing for this reason. People were mainly attracted to the idea that voting online could be very straightforward and that it would make it possible to vote anywhere at any time.

Methods that gave people flexibility around when and where to vote were also liked, as these would increase convenience, especially for those who had to fit in voting within working hours or lived and worked in different areas. Interestingly, older people (over 40’s in particular) felt it would be better if schools didn’t have to be shut for elections.

People appreciated that advance voting would give flexibility to people who knew they wouldn’t have time on election day. Advance voting was also popular amongst respondents who thought it could improve voter turnout. However, others felt there was a risk to voting earlier as you could learn new facts after voting that might change your mind.

People who had long working hours thought that weekend voting would be a better option than voting on a weekday, whilst others felt they didn’t want it taking up their leisure time on the weekend. In Northern Ireland, some people weren’t keen on the idea of weekend voting because of religious practices or because it was the norm not to work on Sundays. They felt elections being held on Saturday also wouldn’t work because votes would be waiting to be counted on Monday, which they thought could increase the chance of them being lost or stolen.

People with mobility issues and those who were considering the needs of people with mobility issues preferred the option of remote voting. In these circumstances, online voting and text voting would give those who couldn’t leave the house the chance to participate, and they could have some type of support at home if they needed it.

When the option of mobile stations was discussed, people with mobility restrictions felt mobile polling stations would be helpful but wondered how they'd be able to trust whoever showed up at their doorstep. A majority of people thought this would be a good option for those who are unable to leave their home and would struggle to apply for other options. However, a considerable number of people had concerns over confirmation and identity verification with mobile voting. Overall, people preferred voting online or by post to mobile polling stations.

"Today's society is about convenience. The voting system should feel special, but also quick and easy. A lot of people won't get round to it if it takes up too much time"

Group, 26-40, England

"Advance voting would increase turnout – widening the window and giving people more time and different options is great"

Group, 41-60, Northern Ireland

However, there is a tension between wanting voting to be easy for all and not losing the things people value about voting in person

It was clear that most people wanted to increase voting turnout, and felt that making the voting process easy and accessible was the best way to achieve this. However, as we encouraged participants to reflect further, people also identified key elements of the in-person voting experience that they valued and wouldn't want to lose.

Unless specified, these elements that people valued came up across the whole sample, including different age groups and nations.

The social and celebratory experience of going to the polling station

Many voters – and particularly those over 40 – mentioned that they enjoyed the social aspect of visiting the polling station. For example, they enjoyed interacting with people from their local community who they might not otherwise see. Others enjoyed seeing or 'getting to know' party members and candidates in person.

For these people, going to the polling station was seen as an opportunity to 'catch up' with other people, rather than to discuss the election or who they had voted for. From this, there seems to be an important distinction between what should be social and what should be private when it comes to voting. Although many people enjoyed the social experience of visiting the polling station, they felt that the decision of who to vote for, the time spent in the voting booth and the act of casting one's vote in should be private.

"The process of going to the polling station is important; you need that interaction – the human touch is all part and parcel of the electoral process"

Paul, 61+, England

Being ‘seen’ to vote

Another important factor that people valued about voting was the idea of ‘being seen’, with some feeling that it would be noticed if they hadn’t gone to their polling station. This was particularly true for participants from Northern Ireland.



“ The fate of our community depends on showing up [to vote] ”

“ If you don’t vote, it is the end of the world ”

Gerald, 50
Northern Ireland

Gerald felt strongly about being physically ‘seen’ by others in his community voting. He felt that people would ask you ‘why’ if you don’t vote, and that not voting was a ‘taboo’. He even mentioned it causing offence.

For him, it was important to vote even if you didn’t agree with the candidates, as you can make ‘a protest vote’.

The sense of community and shared purpose

For some voters, voting often felt like an ‘event’ that offered a sense of collective purpose, agency, and connection to a wider system.

For some, this was linked to emotional ties to their local area or community, due to the polling station being an important local community building and this aspect of seeing people they knew. This feeling was reported by people across different ages, nations and socio-economic backgrounds, however, people who lived in smaller, rural communities often felt this more strongly.

“You go in and you know everyone, you have a wee chat.... Because I am so passionate about voting, when I have voted it makes you feel good. It makes you feel like you’ve contributed to something that is going to potentially affect your life. Not even your life, other people’s lives as well”

Group, 18-25, Scotland

The ritual of casting a vote and going to the polling station

Many voters felt pride in investing their time and effort into voting, with many feeling a sense of satisfaction immediately after casting their vote. This pride was mainly about the physical experience of actually going to the polling station, marking the ballot paper and putting into the ballot box, which they saw as an important ritual.

“Maybe in the future we’ll move to vote online. It is a good idea to make it easier and maybe more people would vote. But I still like the idea of going to the polling station, it’s like a ritual and maybe you need this ‘theatre’ for the process itself”

Kamila, 45, Scotland

The feeling of control and confirmation

Being able to cast their vote in person and see it placed in the ballot box made people across all groups feel more in control of their vote. By physically casting their vote themselves, people felt reassured that their vote was being counted.

“I know that I’ve done it and I’m in control... If you do it in person, then it’s in the box”

Lorna, 44, Scotland

The security of their vote

Tying into the idea of control, security was also important to the majority of voters. Most voters wanted to be certain that their vote had been counted and would be stored securely. As above, they valued seeing their vote go into the ballot box and seeing where it would be stored. They also felt there were fewer opportunities for votes to be manipulated or lost when voting in person. Across all groups, postal or remote voting was seen to be less secure.

“I personally would have no issue with whatever way as long as its secure”

Group, 61+ Northern Ireland

“If we are talking about in an ideal world, we come up with some sort of uncrackable online voting system that can’t be hacked. I mean that would be great. But it is kind of idealistic”

Group, 18-25, Scotland

Privacy when casting a vote

Many people felt that privacy in the act of casting a vote was important. They valued the privacy of being in the individual voting booth and were concerned that this might be lost with remote options, as people may be voting with others close by. Similarly, most people, excluding some of the most engaged voters who were vocal about their investment in particular parties, felt that the decision of who to vote for should also be private.

“[In the voting booth] it’s just you and your vote and no one can take away from that... the standard should be that your vote is kept as private as possible”

Group, 26-40, Northern Ireland

Considering the elements that people valued, there were different reactions to what could change about the voting experience

The alternative voting methods people were presented with can be mainly clustered into remote and in-person options. As well as considering benefits and concerns of each modernisation idea, there were overarching considerations about voting remotely or in person more generally.

Remote voting

Overall, people liked the convenience and accessibility of remote voting options, making it easier for everyone – including those with additional needs – to vote. However, many people across all demographics raised concerns about the security and privacy of remote options, and worried about excluding less digitally confident people. Many people wanted remote options to be introduced slowly and alongside the current options, to give people a choice instead of replacing the existing methods.

Some overarching benefits of remote voting options people could think of were:

- The convenience of not having to leave your house
- Making voting accessible for people with mobility issues who can't leave their house
- Being able to vote even if you have any last-minute setbacks (e.g. not having to plan around voting)

On the other hand, concerns around remote voting included:

- Being more likely to be coerced to vote a certain way
- People 'stealing' others' votes
- Security, particularly for online voting
- Being unable able to vote remotely if you were less confident with technology (particularly for online and text voting)

In-person voting

Overall, people liked that they'd still receive the in-person voting experience with alternative in-person voting methods – voting electronically or online in the polling station, alternative polling stations, choosing where to vote, weekend voting, advance voting, and mobile polling stations. People who worked long hours or who usually struggled to visit the polling station particularly liked the convenience of methods that gave them options for different times and locations for voting. However, some did voice concerns about the logistics of providing alternative times and locations.

Some overarching benefits of alternative in-person options people could think of were:

- Maintaining the in-person experience which people are already familiarised with
- It makes the process feel more special than if it was remote, as it requires people to go to a specific place for it and to meet others doing the same act
- Adding some flexibility around choices of locations and times would enable more people to vote

On the other hand, concerns people had around alternative in-person options included:

- Giving people too many options of places and times could make it less memorable and therefore people could be more likely to forget to vote
- Undermining the significance of voting if polling stations are in more informal places or embedded into other processes
- It could exclude those with mobility issues or accessibility needs

In summary, when presented with alternative methods, people supported ideas that would make the process easy and accessible. However, there were many elements of the in-person experience that people valued and didn't want to lose, or wanted to ensure were present in the alternative options. When designing future changes, both of these elements should be taken into account.

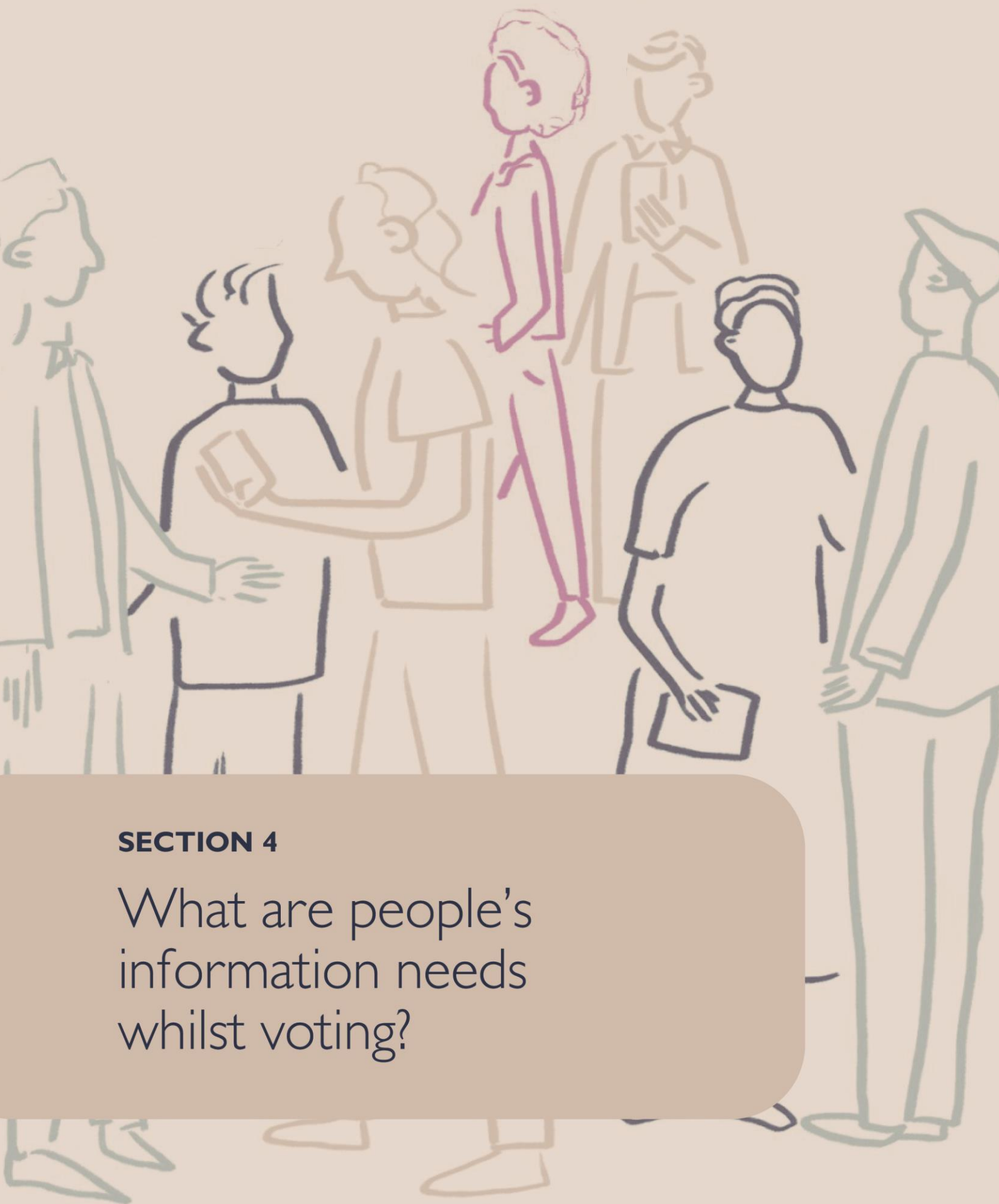
Below we have summarised people's reactions to each of the modernisation options presented.

| Definition | Positives | Concerns | Overall opinion and demographics breakdown |
|--|--|---|---|
| Online voting <i>Casting a vote using a device with internet connection (desktop computer, laptop, tablet, mobile phone) via a browser or an app</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Added accessibility and ease • Flexibility for people to vote anywhere and anytime • Most people are familiarised with online activities (banking, shopping, taxes, etc.) • It would potentially encourage more people to vote due to the ease of access • Additional information about how to vote and the parties/candidates could be easily accessible on the same online voting portal – e.g. short videos or text summaries of each party • It would enable those who worked long hours to vote • Good option for people with mental health issues who struggle to be in crowded and unknown places | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security related to the devices and type of connection (e.g. being hacked) • Not maintaining voters' anonymity (i.e. being able to trace back, associate name/IP, vote) • It may be <i>too</i> easy, therefore people would put less thought into their decision • People would need reassurance that the system was secure • Some people could be coerced to vote a certain way, as with other remote options • Knowing how to trust the website – cues such a government logo would be needed • It could feel too routine - won't have the same sense of achievement as in-person | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall, this was the most popular method across the sample. People liked online voting for its ease and accessibility. Particularly because it made voting possible anywhere and at any time • Young people were surprised this wasn't already an option • Those with low digital confidence felt unsure about voting online but felt they would be able to do it someone else helped them |
| Text voting <i>Casting a vote using a mobile phone via text message</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessible, including to those without internet connection, low digital confidence and elderly • Easy to use as most people are familiar with text messaging | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It would be too easy and this would mean that people would put less thought into their vote • Could be hacked/intercepted • Some people could be coerced to vote a certain way, as with other remote options | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text voting was the least popular voting method among respondents, who felt people would think less about their decision if it was made on their mobile • Disengaged voters were among those who preferred this option since they are more likely to be put off voting due to inconvenience • People from lower SEG sometimes preferred text to online as they felt you would always have the option of unlimited texts but may not always be able to go online as easily |
| All postal <i>All votes are cast by post and electors do not have an option to vote at a polling station.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enables flexibility e.g. travelling abroad, going on holidays, working far from home | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The system is not prepared/safe enough to be able to receive all votes this way and could collapse • People could easily forget when they should cast their vote (there isn't as much 'noise' around it) • Some people could be coerced to vote a certain way, as with other remote options • Harder for people with special needs (e.g. learning difficulties) • Not convenient for people who can't leave their home (to get to a post office/post box) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This was an unpopular option among the majority of respondents as they valued the experience of going to the polling station and having different methods available in case something went wrong with the postal system |

| Definition | Positives | Concerns | Overall opinion and demographics breakdown |
|---|--|---|--|
| E-voting <i>Voting is done through a machine that does not require internet access. Could be at a polling station or remote.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes the process of counting votes faster and easier • Environmentally friendly (with no ballot papers) • More cost-effective (i.e. reducing human resource/people needed) • Some people thought it would help to prevent fraud from happening | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliability – machines crashing or being hacked • Losing sense of control and reassurance that votes have been submitted, compared to putting a ballot paper in a box • Risk of not being anonymous | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall, many people didn't trust the e-voting system and some cited news examples as evidence it is open to corruption • Older people were concerned about lacking the 'confirmation' that the vote had been submitted or received • Many elderly people thought this was the best option for innovation and it was the only way to make alternative polling stations possible |
| Alternative polling stations <i>Voting in locations that aren't currently used as polling stations (e.g. supermarkets, shopping centres, libraries)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes it easier for people to integrate voting into their normal routines • Easy access would increase turnout | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Losing the sense of the importance of voting • Mixing voting with different mindsets like 'getting my groceries' could lead to people putting less thought into their decision • Locations that have commercial purposes (e.g. banks, supermarkets) were considered inappropriate for a polling station as people thought that might incite their involvement in the election process • Certain places could make voting more/less appealing to certain groups by association (e.g. Poundland vs Waitrose) • Losing the feeling of privacy • Not having a calm and quiet environment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People often liked the idea of alternative polling stations if it made voting more convenient and prevented the current inconveniences of polling stations (e.g. they could vote on the way to work and it meant schools didn't close). However, they didn't like the idea of polling stations being in environments that were busy and not private • In England, people thought good places for polling stations were <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Supermarket car park ○ A private space within a public place (e.g. portacabin or a booth) ○ Post office ○ Library ○ Universities ○ Surgeries ○ Bus <p><i>Some of these locations are already used as polling stations in some areas</i></p> |

| Definition | Positives | Concerns | Overall opinion and demographics breakdown |
|--|---|--|---|
| <p>Choose where to vote</p> <p><i>Voters choose which polling station they can vote in – either within or outside their polling district</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convenient for people who live and work in different places • People with additional needs can choose the location that is most accessible | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Logistics – whether you would be able to vote for a different constituency than the one where the polling station is located • It could take longer to count votes • Increase waiting time at polling stations (i.e. if more people are choosing a particular station) • The experience would not be as communal as wouldn't be in the voter's local area | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall, people liked the idea of choosing where to vote if it made voting more convenient (e.g. voting near work) but many raised concerns about how this would work logistically • Adults in England, Scotland and Wales supported this idea as they could see the ease and convenience for people to vote near their workplaces • People with physical disabilities were very keen on this idea so they could make sure their polling station had the accessibility conditions they needed (e.g. car parking, close to their work/house) |
| <p>Weekend voting</p> <p><i>The election day held at the weekend</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convenient – for people who work long hours during the week or have shifts • No need to close schools • People would have the availability to support those with additional needs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Missing out those who prefer to go away during the weekend • Clashing with religious practices or leisure time • It could delay the process of counting votes if not enough people were working/volunteering | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall weekend voting was popular among respondents as it meant schools didn't close for voting. However, concerns were raised over voting interfering with weekend plans • People from Northern Ireland thought fewer people would sign up to work/volunteer during the weekend, which could delay the process of counting votes • In Northern Ireland people felt it would conflict with religious practices |
| <p>Advance voting/voting over multiple days</p> <p><i>Casting a vote in advance of election day.</i></p> <p><i>Being able to vote within a few days instead of a single day</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convenient in the case of last-minute setbacks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There would not be as much sense of occasion • Harder to remember when the election day was | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall people who worked long hours during the week liked this idea. However many were concerned that there wouldn't be a sense of occasion if people cast their vote at different times • Those with health conditions liked this idea as it would still allow them to cast a vote in person if they had a 'bad day' |

| Definition | Positives | Concerns | Overall opinion and demographics breakdown |
|---|---|--|---|
| <p>Mobile polling stations</p> <p><i>Bringing polling stations to remote places or where people can't go out (e.g. care homes, prisons, hospitals)</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessible to people who would otherwise struggle to vote • Good alternative for people who can't leave their home and keeps the physical act of putting your ballot in the box • Feeling more secure knowing you've placed your ballot in by hand instead of by post | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To ensure equality, it would need to be consistent across all locations - e.g. at all nursing homes and hospitals, not selected ones • Security of moving ballot boxes often • Cost of implementation • Some people could be coerced to vote a certain way, as with other remote options • How people would identify a legitimate mobile polling station | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many people raised concerns about how you would identify if the mobile polling station people were legitimate. However, they also recognised the benefits this would have for people who were bed-bound and couldn't get to a polling station • People with mobility issues supported this idea |



SECTION 4

What are people's
information needs
whilst voting?

What are people's information needs whilst voting?

When it came to the information people felt they needed to cast a vote, most people across the sample understood *how* to cast a vote and felt that information provision in this area was sufficient. However, people sometimes didn't know *why* it was important to vote, or how to make an informed decision on who or what to vote for. As a result, even if they knew how to vote, they may be prevented from doing so. There are opportunities to innovate around information provision for both of these issues.

People sometimes didn't know why it was important to vote, or didn't know how to make an informed decision – which prevented them from voting

Within the sample, people reported varied needs and interests when it came to the information that they would like to have access to. However, when analysing what people said they wanted and how they felt about the available information, there were two main challenges for most of the sample:

- Knowing why it is important to vote and participate
- Knowing how to make an informed decision

These challenges impact people's **motivation to vote** and their **ability to vote**. They also have implications for the types of information people may require around election time.

"When I haven't voted it's because I had no idea who to vote for because it was so confusing and nothing was standing out in terms of who I should vote for"

Group, 26-40, England

1. Knowing why it is important to vote and participate

For some groups, there was a strong connection between their personal history and participating in elections. People from Northern Ireland, women and BAME groups felt that voting was more important because of their history – they could see how important it was to be represented in the democratic system.

"For me not to vote would be a vote for the opposition, to waste a vote. It would be life changing for Northern Ireland in terms of our cultural identity – if not enough people from one side vote... in 10-20 years it could be dramatically different"

Janet, 51, Northern Ireland

However, active non-voters and those who were confused and disinterested in voting lacked motivation for voting because they didn't see the relevance of voting for them personally. Some people weren't voting because they didn't think they could make a difference as an individual, and they weren't seeing information telling them otherwise.

Lack of understanding of the electoral system – e.g. how every vote contributes to electing a winner

People who were less engaged with voting didn't fully understand 'how a winner gets elected' and how their vote factored into the wider electoral system. A small number of people across all groups felt that it wasn't worth voting in some elections because their constituency had been a party stronghold for many years – so voting for another party wouldn't make a difference. In this case, a lack of information is not the big issue, but rather their perceptions of how the electoral system works. These people may benefit from seeing examples of when change had happened as the result of an election.

When asked, information about the electoral system wasn't rated as particularly important, but it did seem to factor into people's motivation to vote. Those who were more engaged and motivated to vote found information about the electoral system important, as it helped to prove the significance of every election and every vote. Also, some people mentioned that having the information about how the winner gets elected and the issues at stake in the election would allow them to vote more strategically.

People from Northern Ireland also wanted percentage figures for how many people voted, and how many went to exercise their right to vote but spoiled their ballot. They mentioned that figures for how many votes out of the total were actually counted and information about how they are counted would help them understand the impact of elections and to engage more.

The media sometimes reinforced the 'negativity' around candidates and parties

Negative information about candidates and parties had a big impact on people's motivation to vote because it could make it seem that there wasn't a candidate who was worth voting for. Much of this negativity was seen to come from social media or wider media stories. For example, younger people – particularly from Scotland – felt a lot of the information about politics was negative and made them feel that making the effort to vote wasn't worth it.

Group, 18-25 Scotland

The group felt disengaged with voting because it was associated with arguing and negative conversations.

Hugh didn't vote because he had "only ever heard bad things" about politics. Zelda, who voted for whoever her mum voted for, agreed and felt politics was a "rotten" topic. However, she thought if the process was explained at the polling station it would make voting easier.

Motivation sometimes varied depending on the type of election

As mentioned previously, people across the sample felt that the ‘general’ elections (i.e. UK Parliamentary, Scottish Parliament or Senedd/Welsh Parliament) and referendums were the most important and that their vote mattered more in these elections. They tended to make a greater effort for these elections, pushing through bad weather, poor health or other limitations to cast their vote.

Motivation tended to be highest when people were aware of the impact of elections, and a few people felt that their vote mattered more in local elections. These people felt more directly connected to the issues at stake, as they were aware that their decision would have implications for their local area and daily lives. Despite this, most people felt that information for local elections was lacking compared to the wealth of mainstream information available for general elections.

There was a slight contrast in the importance of different elections when it came to the devolved nations. For example, some people prioritised Welsh Parliament or Scottish Parliament elections over UK Parliamentary elections because it was unclear how the UK general elections impacted the issues in their countries. A few voters from the devolved nations understood how much power their parliament held, which encouraged them to vote. And those who learnt about these powers during the group discussions felt they should put more effort in voting in their Parliamentary elections.

Overall, there was a general desire to understand the impact of different elections. Many felt that this information was not as easily accessible and must be sought out, and agreed they wanted it to be highlighted more and made clearer for every election.

“I missed a local [election] because of my health. If it was national I would drag myself. ... obviously nationwide [election] is far bigger and affects the whole Nation, whereas a local one is just a much smaller area”

Louise, 53, Scotland

“I don’t often vote in the local elections, I just think that if you vote at general level then you should get those things at a local level”

Group, 26-40, England

“General elections are more important as they’re about the bigger issues that affect the whole country”

Group, 26-40, England

“Local election affects where I live and affects me; it feels more ‘doable’. In general elections candidates all try and promise too much”

Eloise, 56, England

Discussion about
Welsh Parliament
elections in

**Group, 61+
Wales**

“ In Wales, the government elections have now become more important... people have no idea how much responsibility we have in Wales, and we can be held accountable ”

John

“ I haven’t been as dedicated to take part in local election in the past... but listening to John, maybe I should more ”

Tim

“ I can’t be bothered to vote locally, but I probably will now... I had no idea how much responsibility they [Welsh Parliament] have now ”

Jane

2. Knowing how to make an informed decision

In general, people felt quite confident about the process of casting a vote. However, making the decision of who to vote for was an important factor in being able to vote. People reported that they wanted different types of content to help them make up their mind, and they felt that some of these were missing.

Voters were seeking out three main types of information:

- 1) Policies and standpoints
- 2) How much candidates can be trusted
- 3) The character and personality of candidates

Policies and standpoints

People across all groups felt it was most important to know who the candidates and parties were, details about them, and the key differences between them. The overall perception was that it was easy to find out who candidates were, particularly for general elections. However, people found it difficult to compare parties and candidates, and as a result felt that there wasn't much difference between parties – they knew *who* they could vote for but were unsure of *why* they should vote for them. Tools do exist for this (such as BBC comparisons), but many people weren't aware of them.

For the UK Parliamentary elections, information about policies was easily accessible as it was covered 'everywhere' – people found information on the news and TV, and often received leaflets in the post. These sources were common for older and less digitally confident people, although some of the content that they were interested in was missing from the limited sources they had access to. Some people chose to look for further information on social media platforms, in their local newspaper, the party's website or broadcasts, or by downloading their manifesto (although almost no one would read manifestos completely and many people preferred to have summaries of the key points).

The quality and quantity of available information differed across parties. Across all nations and demographics, people struggled to find information about smaller parties and acknowledged that larger parties received much more coverage. They felt this was unfair as people wouldn't be able to access smaller parties' policies as easily. This was true to the extent that in England and Scotland, smaller or independent candidates were often not known by respondents until they received their ballot paper.

People disagreed on the importance of information about the key issues at stake in the election, as some felt this would inform their decision whilst others felt it wasn't as relevant as the candidate's position on all issues. Most people felt it was harder to find information about these key issues, and that they'd need to make extra effort to get detailed and accurate information. For local elections in particular, voters wanted this information to be clearly available in local newspapers or posters around their area.

Some people felt that more could be done to provide information about policies. For example, young people in Wales and Scotland thought it would be useful to have basic information about the parties and candidates on the ballot paper in case people were unsure at the last minute; and they suggested that if voting was online, this type of information should be included at the voting page before seeing the list of candidates.

“I would like to have a clear idea of policies of each party so you don’t have to be harassed by people”

Group, 18-25, Scotland

“If you’re bombarded with information about the key people, sometimes the smaller people can get lost in that... I’ve been surprised before about names appearing on ballot papers and think, I’ve never heard of that person”

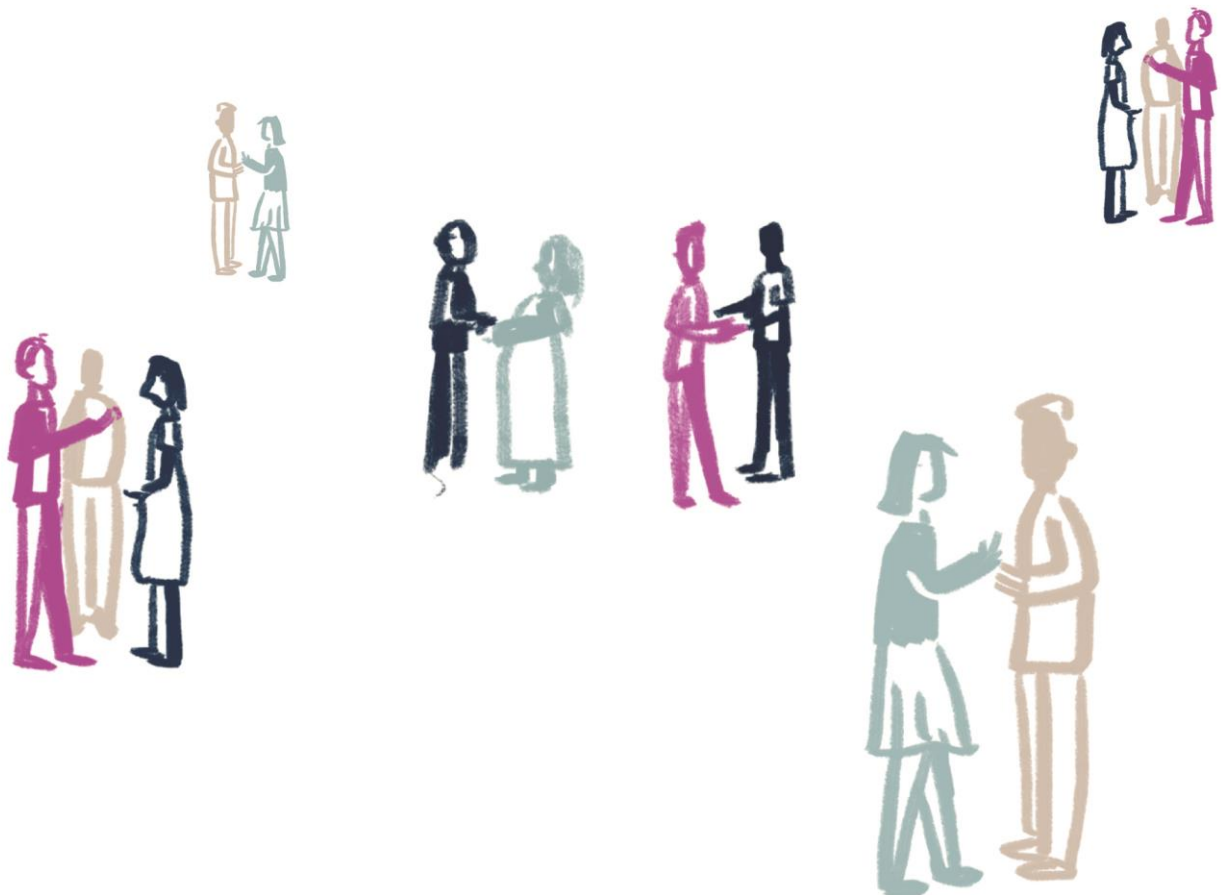
Group, 26-40, Scotland

“You don’t hear much about the little parties... it would be beneficial to have leaflets on each party in the polling station to have a look at before you cast your vote”

Group, 26-40, England

How much candidates can be trusted

People wanted to know how much candidates could be trusted, particularly by understanding their past and how likely they would be to follow up on their promises. Even though there is abundant existing information about candidates and their policies, people felt that this content was not necessarily true – many respondents felt that the manifestos were lies or false promises that the politicians wouldn’t be able to keep. They felt that having more detailed information about the candidates’ previous work or decisions would make them feel more reassured.



Similarly, people wanted ongoing tracking of candidates' past, present and future plans. They felt that this information should always be available, not just when they were running for an election. This would encourage people to vote, as they would feel they could hold the politicians to account if they didn't deliver what they promised. People found it even more important to know about the candidates' past and their 'attachment' to the local area for local elections, as it was important that they felt connected to the area and understood the needs of the people living there.

In order to be informed about how much candidates can be trusted, some more engaged respondents used fact-checking websites or searched for their voting history. Unsurprisingly, social media was a preferred source for more informal information about candidates. Twitter and Facebook were particularly useful for voters to see if candidates had posted anything incriminating in the past, since it was easy to track backwards. Some of the actively engaged voters followed political party members and candidates on social media to track their opinions on current affairs, or looked at other people posting about the candidates' past records or tracking what they promised and delivered.

This information about candidates' previous work was not easy to find and many voters felt they needed to refer to social media. Most people were apprehensive about trusting a lot of the information they saw on social media, as they acknowledged that anyone can post and use these platforms to share fake news in order to motivate people to vote in a particular direction.



“The different parties are just competing between each other and not giving all the information, so I prefer to get information by word of mouth and from friends on Facebook”

“If they [politicians] claim they're the only ones who can get it done, I don't trust them”

Sarah, 47
Northern Ireland

Sarah feels voting is important because people fought for the vote, but at the same time, feels the political situation in Northern Ireland is complicated.

She feels you 'don't know who you're voting for anymore, so has lost motivation. She hasn't voted in the last three elections as she hasn't understood the policies.

She distrusts politicians and feels they 'claim too much', so she prefers to get information from people she knows.

“If we had more information about them, what they've done – then we'd have more reassurance, and not just their promises and lies”

Group, 41-60, Wales

"You have to trust the person, so it would be good if there was an online document or something like a CV with their achievements, done by an independent source"

Group, 18-25, England

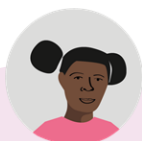
The character and personality of candidates

Many people felt it was important to know each candidate's personality and character. They thought these aspects would give them a better idea of their leadership skills, how they would react to stressful situations and how they would work under pressure.

People received this information through TV debates, social media posts from everyday people and word of mouth, the latter particularly for local elections. They liked hearing politicians' reactions to different events and how they approached things on social media, although they recognised that what they posted on social media may not be true. However, people would like to receive more information about candidates' personalities, and to have more sources available for finding information about it.

"I want more details of what they do, their personalities – are they strong enough characters to make change?"

Arthur, 34, Wales



“ People’s opinions of politicians are more important to me than seeing the news, as you’re not seeing the actual person on the news... On TV they have to word it a certain way ”

“ I want to be part of a change, especially if it’s going to have a community effect ”

**Kaylee, 28
Wales**

Kaylee used to be disengaged with voting, but since having her children, she now feels it's important to have a say on things that will affect her family and community.

She values people's opinions of politicians and gets these from Facebook or word of mouth. She feels it's important to understand a candidate's personality, how trustworthy they are, and if they have a family, because this shows they're not selfish.

Even though there's a lot of information available, people often said information was 'overwhelming'

People acknowledged that there is a large amount of information available around elections. But having more information available wasn't a sign of being better informed. In general, people found that information could feel 'overwhelming', which meant different things for different people:

- Not knowing where to start searching for information and which search terms to use
- Not knowing how to identify sources they could trust
- Not knowing how to analyse or make up their minds about 'what's best'

"It's getting increasingly harder to vote, not because of the mechanisms, but partly information overload and trusting the source"

Group, 41-60, Wales

Not knowing where to start searching for information and which terms to use

People had issues both with searching for information and determining what to engage with from search results. In particular, those who lacked confidence and interest around voting found it difficult to know where to start searching for information. The majority of people would go to Google as a starting point. However, some wouldn't know what terms to search for online – when asked how to find information on previous election results, some said they wouldn't know how to word their search.

For example, younger people were unsure of how they could find specific information about key events if they hadn't found out from friends or social media.

"If I was quite new to voting, unless I asked someone about it, I probably wouldn't be able to find it on the internet unless I put something really specific in." [On the Liberal Democrats' policy change regarding student fees in 2010]

Group, 18-25, Wales

Respondents often felt that having all of the relevant information in one place would make them feel more comfortable searching for information. For example, they would find information easier to understand if they had an interactive source with drop-down options to filter the information.

However, just making information available, even if it's all in one place, doesn't mean people can find it in the first place. It was clear that many less engaged people were unaware of content that was already in place. Signposting to relevant information is just as important as making that information accessible.

"I just go to Google because Google's got everything on, but I wouldn't really know how to word it"

Group, 18-25, Wales

"People get overwhelmed I think and that's why they don't bother [voting]. If they just had one thing that was more interactive it would be beneficial"

Group, 26-40, Wales

Not knowing how to identify sources they could trust

Many people mentioned that, although there were many sources sharing information about candidates and elections, they ‘didn’t know what to trust’. Although most people would find it easy to use Google, they were unsure how to choose which results to engage with or trust, and some would find it difficult to trust their own judgement when it came to selecting particular results.

People particularly struggled to develop trust in two areas: news sources and politicians or candidates.

When it comes to news sources, people across all demographics knew that newspapers had different biases and they could see contradictory things across different sources. Many people trusted BBC news more, as they saw them as ‘less biased’. Some voters, across all ages and nations, were also aware that social media could include fake news.

For these reasons, some people thought that it was necessary to consult different sources in order to know what to trust. This was particularly true for the most informed and engaged voters, who saw consulting different sources as part of their responsibility to make an informed decision. However, this impulse was often in tension with the fact that many people didn’t want to put in too much effort to find information.

People from Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland felt that information about their countries was harder to find than information about England. As a result, they trusted local newspapers and local groups on social media more, as these were more representative of their nation and relatable for them.

People also struggled to trust politicians and whether they were telling the truth, in their manifestos, on TV and in other sources. When voters could tell that candidates lied, there was a feeling of hopelessness that they would be held to account. To feel more confidence towards candidates, older people liked the idea of asking them about any queries they may have and receiving a direct response.

To improve their trust in information, people suggested having ‘neutral’ sources about candidates and their policies. They suggested information being shared by independent, non-partisan sources – for example, some people thought that universities would be a reliable source of independent information. Interestingly, some independent information does exist - for example, on the Electoral Commission’s website - but not many people were aware of these or using them. This is a sign that information should be better signposted or publicised.

Many people mentioned they’d like to receive a summary of key issues, candidates and parties in the form of a ‘voting pack’ with their poll card. This would make it more of ‘an experience’, rather than receiving leaflets and information at different times, and would reassure them that it was more ‘official’ and trustworthy. However, there were discussions around how to make this neutral – who would decide the order of the parties, how much information and what key points would be included.

"I find it misleading when I'm forced to ingest what certain news outlets say are the most important policies which might not be what I am interested in"

Group, 18-25, England

"I'd search for similar articles in different newspapers or sources to check if it's true. Everyone has a bias but I trust that universities are more ethical and have to be balanced"

Lily, 32, Scotland



Discussion in
**Group, 26-40
England**

“It would be good if you also got other information with it [poll card], like who the parties are. You do get flyers through the door, so perhaps it would be better if it came as a voting pack, so it’s a bit more of an experience, so you feel like you’re receiving something with a bit more importance ”

“If you could scan a QR code and it’d load a page and tell you the details of your candidates, that would be quite useful... maybe a candidate statement, what their background is, who they’re standing for... so you can get to know the basics about them and their beliefs ”

Not knowing how to analyse or make up their minds about ‘what’s best’

For others, ‘overwhelming’ meant not knowing how to make their mind up or make a final decision on who or what to vote for.

Some young respondents who were less engaged with politics and voting admitted that they simply voted for who their family voted for, or for ‘whoever was in the lead’. This could have been a result of not knowing where to find information about parties as a new voter, as well as uncertainty about what information to choose and how to make this decision. This behaviour was seemingly influenced by the fact they were used to passively consuming information through social media, rather than actively seeking out information. Some people from Northern Ireland in particular felt that educating young people on their voting options and parties was very important, as many are disengaged or copy their parents’ choices.

Young people wanted more visual information, such as short (5 minute) videos and graphs with key points about candidates and the issues in the election. These would present the information in clear and easily digestible forms that could be consulted quickly, making the decision easier for younger and newer voters.

“Sometimes I just don’t know what’s going on and I’ll maybe see on the news that this party’s in the lead... I’ll just vote for them to get out of there as fast as I can”

Group, 18-25, Wales

“Loads of writing puts a lot of people off, a video would be good because then you could just look at it”

Group, 16-17, Scotland

“I’ll usually just go to my mum, ‘who did you vote for?’, my mum tells me who she voted for and I just put a tick. That’s why it’s so quick”

Group, 18-25, Scotland

Even though some people felt more confident about their stance on certain issues, sometimes they couldn’t see how this related to certain parties and it was difficult to find which parties or candidates were in line with their preferences. Other respondents felt that it was difficult to understand the key differences between parties and it seemed that their policies were all the same.

Many people mentioned that they would find a comparison of information useful, and when they were shown examples of existing sources that do this (e.g. BBC website), they were surprised that they hadn’t seen it before. Again, this may indicate that this information should be better signposted.

A few of the most engaged voters would read articles from political commentators and follow them on Twitter because they analysed the information in detail and explained it in simple language. They felt that commentators were more trustworthy as they combine their expert knowledge with the 'facts' being shared.

As mentioned above, the people who suggested a voting pack as a trustworthy source also thought this would be useful for helping them to make up their minds. This suggestion shows that people had a desire for clear and comparable information in one place, as opposed to receiving lots of information from different sources.

People with different needs had different suggestions for how they might be helped to make a decision. For example, those who feel they 'should' vote and people with learning disabilities in particular wanted summaries and clear, concise information in one place. Some compared this to the 240-character snapshots on Twitter, which they felt would be sufficient.

"[Twitter] it's short and sharp - I like it a lot"

Jack, 42, Northern Ireland

"I'd like something that would pop up on Instagram, simple, straight to the point"

Group, 16-17, Scotland

"I'd be more interested in commentators because they don't only say the information but they analyse it - whereas candidates can be very ambitious and would say things that are not really happening"

Alys, 49, Wales

Overall, most people understood how to cast a vote

Unsurprisingly, everyone felt it was crucial to know *how* to vote in order to be able to exercise this right. Across the sample, almost everyone knew how to cast a vote or understood at least one way that they would be able to do so. People also felt that once they knew the process, they did not need any more information about it. Those who had been voting for years felt very confident about how to vote, as the process had not changed over time.

However, a few groups of people experienced some issues with casting a vote:

People from lower SEGs and some individuals from Northern Ireland could become confused when they had to vote in different ways for different elections – first-past-the-post, alternative vote, single transferable vote – which made them feel insecure about how well they were marking their ballot paper.

Some first-time voters were unsure about how to vote. Within these groups, some had received more information than others. For example, young Scottish people who had done Modern Studies in school tended to feel more confident with voting, but even some of them were surprised that the ballot paper instructed a cross instead of a tick to select the candidate or party.

Young people felt they would benefit from learning more about the voting process at school, to enable them to feel more confident when voting for the first time and to clarify any doubts or misconceptions. Many people, young and old, also felt it was important to learn more about the electoral system, how the winner was elected and the difference between elections.

"I need to educate myself more about what the different parties have to offer ... we should be educated more in school about it... There's nothing to do on the elections or voting at school, so we just get information from our family and news."

Tim, 17, Wales

There were other factors that affected how confident people felt when voting. People with mental health needs or physical disabilities said it would be useful to have clearer information about how to get 'extra support' in case they needed it. For example, if they were feeling anxious or they needed help to mark their vote on the ballot paper. People with additional needs also felt that being able to identify 'quieter' polling stations or to access a volunteer for 'moral support' would also improve their confidence when voting.

People's knowledge about the different methods varied considerably

Polling station voting

Though all participants had heard of in-person voting, there were some misconceptions about how exactly this worked.

Notably, there was uncertainty about whether it was necessary to take a poll card to vote. Some people thought that they could not vote without a poll card, and had not voted in the past because they had lost their card. Learning from their experience, these people thought it should be clearer that you can still vote without a poll card.

Groups with people aged 40+ remarked more that the information on the poll card was useful as a reminder that elections were taking place.

Some young voters assumed that ID would be required polling station and were surprised when they found out ID is currently not needed in most nations.



Lizzie
Group, 26-40
England

On one occasion, Lizzie's polling card got ruined in the rain when it was left in her post box. She had assumed that she needed it to vote and felt she couldn't use it, so she didn't vote.

Postal voting

Most respondents had heard of postal voting. As mentioned in the previous section, people in Northern Ireland were generally the least familiar with postal voting due to the requirement to provide a valid reason for voting by post.

Most people who had voted by post had done so for a specific reason, such as being on holiday around the time of the election. Some younger people had seen their parents voting by post all their lives so they thought this would be the best option.

Some postal voters found the paperwork and instructions confusing when voting for the first time. As a result, some were anxious about making mistakes and felt compelled to 'triple check' forms before sending them off. This was particularly true for people who had difficulty processing complex information'

"I'm voting a week ahead of everyone else [by post] and on my own ...the instructions about what to put in which envelope and which way to have the paper facing are quite confusing. It's quite clunky and you're worrying whether you've put everything in the right envelope"

Karen, England, 61+

Voting by proxy

Proxy voting was the least known of all the options, and some younger and more disengaged people had never heard of it. As mentioned previously, some physically disabled people felt that being reliant on another person took away their independence and control, and saw postal voting as more appealing as a result. Among those who had tried proxy voting, a few felt the registration process was complex.

“It [proxy voting] was slightly more difficult to find out about – both people had to fill in forms and give some details. I think it could have been more simplified”

Group, Scotland, 61+

Overall, the majority of people knew about an ‘alternative’ voting method that they could use if necessary. The minority who didn’t know about postal or proxy voting worried that they wouldn’t know what to do, or if they could vote at all, if they unexpectedly couldn’t vote in person.

Interestingly, some young people were convinced that online voting was an option and felt shocked to learn that it isn’t currently.

Some people were not always aware when local elections were happening

Even though people felt prepared to cast a vote when it was needed, a major issue that people reported was that it wasn’t always clear when elections were happening. This was more common for local elections, as these featured less in the information people regularly engaged with.

Respondents felt that there was more ‘noise’ around general elections, national elections and referendums, but they would often only find out about local elections when their poll card arrived. People were also less aware of elections for lesser-known roles, such as the Police and Crime Commissioner, and many of them felt surprised when they were issued ballot papers for these. For this reason, voters felt they had to ‘dig around’ to feel informed about local elections, whereas information about general elections was all over the news.

It’s worth noting that respondents used the phrase ‘general’ elections to refer to the UK Parliamentary elections, Scottish Parliament and Senedd/Welsh Parliament (formerly Welsh Assembly).

“I am guilty of not knowing about local elections until I get the poll card through. Sometimes I think, ‘I don’t know anything about the parties and I don’t know anything about what this election is for, therefore I’ll leave it’, but that doesn’t mean I don’t see the importance of local elections. It would be nice if it was a bit more accessible”

Group, 26-40, England

In summary, most people had the information they needed to inform them of how to vote, but what was preventing them from voting was a lack of knowledge about why they should vote, or how to make a decision.

Although there is a lot of information out there, people say that they find it overwhelming, which could point to opportunities around signposting information more effectively or supporting people to evaluate which sources are trustworthy.

A line art illustration of a group of people in a meeting. There are seven figures in total. On the left, a man in a suit is gesturing with his hand. Next to him is a woman in a dark top and light pants, also gesturing. In the center, a man in a light-colored shirt and dark pants is gesturing towards the woman on his left. To his right, a man in a dark suit is standing with his hands clasped. Further right, a woman in a light-colored dress is holding a folder. In the background, another man in a light-colored shirt is visible. The entire illustration is rendered in a simple, sketchy style with thin lines and no facial features. The background is a solid light gray.

Conclusion

Conclusion

Conclusion about the experience of casting a vote

What is important to people when they vote?

Most people said that increasing turnout was key – this was often linked to making the process easier or giving people more options. However, there were other things apart from ease that people valued about the experience – these were the more emotional aspects of the voting experience, including:

- feeling a sense of purpose
- feeling a sense of occasion
- feeling like you are investing effort and doing something worthwhile
- feeling like voting is a collective experience

Additionally, the reasons for people not voting often had less to do with the process being too difficult and more to do with a lack of motivation, or because they didn't know who to vote for.

The biggest barriers to voting were in fact disengagement with politics or feeling that voting was insignificant and not going to bring about any change. People with these views were often young or of a lower SEG. Whilst ease is important, motivating people to vote is also a big consideration.

Both ease and motivation can be supported through innovations around the way the voting experience is designed (modernisation) and the information people receive.

What do the public think about the current ways people can cast their vote at elections in the UK?

Overall, people found the current methods fairly straightforward. In person-voting was often the preferred and default option. However there were people who did have some criticisms of aspects of the in-person experience, including those with mental health issues who found the polling station environment overwhelming or stressful.

Postal voting was perceived by some as taking more effort and being less reliable, although this was generally the view of people who hadn't tried postal voting before. Among those who hadn't voted by post before, there was a general sense of mistrust and concern over postal voting often based around distrust in the reliability of the postal service.

However postal voting was highly valued by those who would struggle to vote in person, particularly those with disabilities.

What would improve people's voting experience?

Above all, people wanted everyone to be able to vote, including different demographics and people with additional needs. However, when people thought about it more, they didn't want voting to be so easy that people voted without thinking about it. Future changes should take into consideration that making the voting process too easy could undermine how significant some people think voting is.

When presented with alternative methods, people supported ideas that would make the process easy and accessible. However, there were many elements of the in-person experience that people valued and didn't want to lose, or wanted to ensure were present in the alternative options:

- The social and celebratory experience of going to the polling station
- Being 'seen' to vote
- The sense of community and shared purpose
- The ritual of casting a vote and going to the polling station
- The feeling of control and confirmation
- The security of their vote
- Privacy when casting a vote

What do people think about proposed alternative ways of being able to cast their vote, and why they may prefer some options over others?

Online voting was the most popular alternative voting method across the sample, particularly because it would make voting possible anywhere and at any time. Some young people were surprised when they heard this wasn't already an option. However, there were some concerns around digital literacy and security.

Other popular alternative voting options included allowing voting in locations that aren't currently used as polling stations and giving voters more choice about where they go, weekend voting and the ability to vote in advance or over multiple days.

Options which prompted concerns from people included text voting which some felt would devalue the voting experience, only being able to vote by post and E-voting on a machine at the polling station. Mobile polling stations, while popular with people with mobility issues, also raised issues around security and practicality.

In summary, when presented with alternative methods, people supported ideas that would make the process easy and accessible. However, there were many elements of the in-person experience that people valued and didn't want to lose, or wanted to ensure were present in the alternative options. When designing future changes, both of these elements should be taken into account.

Conclusion about the information needs

What information does the public want around elections, voting and politics?

People's unmet needs around information are related to their motivation to participate in voting and how to make a decision about what/who to vote for. For disengaged people, the issues lay with not understanding the electoral system or the significance of their vote. People often wanted to know about policies and the candidates themselves, although they sometimes found the existing information 'overwhelming' and didn't know where to begin searching for information or what to trust. Voters also wanted information that helped them understand the powers of the Parliament in each nation and how General and Local elections impact the issues in their countries and local areas. Most importantly, people wanted to know what the election is for and its impact on them (i.e. for UK Parliament versus their local government or for a Police and Crime Commissioner)

Overall, when it comes to making a decision on who to vote for, voters were seeking out three main types of information:

- 1) Policies and standpoints
- 2) How much candidates can be trusted
- 3) The character and personality of candidates

Do different people want different information and what would change if they had it?

In terms of the process of casting a vote, some people from lower SEGs and from NI wanted to better understand the different ways they had to vote to feel more confident. For young people and first-time voters it was important to know about the process and the electoral system, how the winner was elected and the difference between elections to feel prepared to vote. It is important for people with mental health needs or physical disabilities to have clearer information about how to get 'extra support' in case they needed it to feel more at ease.

Most of the active non-voters don't think their vote would make a difference as an individual. They said that the reason they were not voting was not a lack of information, but not seeing the relevance of voting for them. After voting, people from Northern Ireland wanted figures for how many votes out of the total were actually valid and how many were spoiled. They were also interested to see how votes are counted. This type of information would help them understand the impact of elections and, more importantly, it would reassure them that the process is transparent so they can trust it is being done the right way.

For some people from the devolved nations, it was important to understand how the UK general elections impacted the issues in their countries, and the power that their parliament held, as it would help them to understand what they're voting for and how it would impact them, and it would encourage them to vote.

The research is clear that people say they want information that would help them decide who to vote for and help them to understand the significance of voting. This could potentially impact people's motivation to vote and, ultimately, who they choose to vote for. However, we can't answer with any certainty what would change if people were provided this range of additional information, as it's unclear to what extent this information would actively encourage people to vote in the real world.

What's the importance to people of the source of any information and how do people assess whether information is good information?

The source of the information played an important role in people's trust of the information that source contained. Most people struggled to develop trust towards two particular sources of information: news sources and politicians or candidates.

When it comes to news sources, people acknowledged that newspapers had different biases. Many people trusted the BBC news more, as they saw them as 'less biased', and some voters were also aware that social media could include fake news so they would take that into consideration when reading news there. Having local sources of information was very important for people from Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland, for example local newspapers and local groups on social media, as these were more representative of their nation and relatable for them. People from Northern Ireland also trusted word of mouth more than other sources. A few of the most engaged voters would prefer information from political commentators because they felt they analysed the information in detail and explained it in simple language. Older people valued having the opportunity to ask candidates about any queries they may have and receiving a direct response.

People also have different perceptions of what makes information good. Younger people valued short, concise and visual information, as it would help them learn what key ideas they should take away. Some more engaged voters would look at multiple sources and check if the information was contradictory and were using fact checking websites. Only a few people from the most engaged voters would check the sources where particular graphs or references were taken from.

In general, people had a desire for clear and comparable information in one place, as opposed to receiving lots of information from different sources. People also valued having 'neutral' sources about candidates and their policies, and independent, non-partisan sources – for example, universities. Many people said they would like a 'voting pack' along with their poll card as it would reassure them that the information was more 'official' and trustworthy.

In summary, what was preventing some people from voting was a lack of knowledge about *why* they should vote, or *how to make a decision*. Although there is a lot of information out there, people say that they find it overwhelming, which could point to opportunities around signposting information more effectively or supporting people to evaluate which sources are trustworthy.

Annex

Current voting methods

| Voting method | Overall opinion | Demographic breakdown |
|------------------------|---|---|
| Polling station | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person is still seen as the default or preferred method • During the groups, a minority of people began to question how secure the process of counting ballot papers was, but the majority still felt it was more secure than postal • People valued seeing their vote go into the ballot box and seeing for themselves where they were stored, and felt there were less touchpoints for votes to be manipulated or lost compared to postal or remote options. • Going to the polling station and casting a vote gave them a sense of shared purpose and agency, and a feeling that they were part of a wider event and system. • Many voters felt pride in investing time and effort into voting – both intellectually, in making their decision about who to vote for, and in physically going to the polling station. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For some with mental health issues, the polling station being busy was a concern. They found it being busy stressful, and so would prefer polling stations to be quieter. • Some younger people felt the polling station didn't feel special and was anti-climactic. they found the stations to be underwhelming. • A minority of the sample reported that they found the polling station intimidating or too formal. This was particularly prevalent among younger people (especially those who hadn't voted before) and disengaged voters, who expressed concerns about "being watched" and worried the polling station would be a "pressurising" environment. • In Northern Ireland, older people raised concerns over the location of polling stations. Sometimes respondents felt they were difficult to access, or were assigned to go to further stations, when there were other options nearer by. • In Northern Ireland, some people even felt that polling stations were located in political places where there were religious divides and would feel uncomfortable going somewhere with opposing views. • The voters who enjoyed the social aspect of voting, mainly those over 40s, often mentioned that they enjoyed seeing and speaking to neighbours and people from their local community, who they may not otherwise see, at the polling station. • Another important factor about the in-person experience for some people was being seen voting, particularly for those in Northern Ireland. Some felt like it would be noticed if they hadn't gone to their polling station to cast a vote. • People with mental health needs or physical disabilities said it would be useful to have clearer information about how to get 'extra support' in case they needed it. Small things such as being able to know when polling stations were quieter or having a volunteer for 'moral support' would make people with additional needs feel more at ease. • Those with physical disabilities largely opted for the postal vote over going to the polling station because of the difficulties of arranging travel there. |

| Voting method | Overall opinion | Demographic breakdown |
|---------------|--|---|
| Postal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Postal voting was seen as ‘more complicated’ for those who were used to going to the polling station. • Postal voting was mainly used in situations where people could not get to the polling station or were following their parents’ tradition. • For those who had only voted in polling stations, postal voting was perceived to take more effort and be less reliable than in-person voting. • People’s perception of the process being ‘more complicated’ was triggered by the cognitive effort involved in having to plan in advance (i.e. applying, registering, providing some evidence in the case of some nations), rather the actual physical effort. • Among those who hadn’t voted by post before, there was a general sense of mistrust and concern over postal voting • People perceived the postal service as unreliable • For most people who had voted by post, it was because they had a specific reason to do so, such as being on holiday around the time of the election. • Some postal voters felt the instructions were unclear when they voted for the first time via post and found the paperwork confusing. Therefore, they needed to triple check before putting the forms in each envelope. • The general view was that postal voting would not be as easy as in-person voting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Postal voting was sometimes more physical effort for people in rural areas across all nations, as they often didn’t have post boxes nearby and had to drive to post their vote. • Some people with depression and chronic illness felt the postal vote gave them the security that if they were having a “low day” they would still be able to vote. • A few people with anxiety preferred communicating with people in other forms than face to face, which made the postal vote more appealing. • Some disabled people felt excluded by postal voting, as they wanted the social experience of the polling station. • Those with physical disabilities largely opted for the postal vote over going to the polling station because of the difficulties of arranging travel there. They also had anxieties around whether there would be disabled access. • Those with physical disabilities faced difficulties with the postal vote such as remembering that they have to get it in early or having to rely on someone to get them to a post box. • Overall, people from Northern Ireland felt a bit reluctant to use postal or proxy voting. • Generally, people in Northern Ireland were the least familiar with postal voting, as they are asked to justify with a valid reason why they’d need to vote by post. • Some younger people had seen their parents voting by post all their lives so they thought this would be the best option. • People who had difficulties processing information were also anxious about making mistakes. |
| Proxy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proxy voting was the least-known option. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some physically disabled people felt that being reliant on another person took away their independence and control when it came to voting, therefore it was very unappealing to them and they voted by post for this reason. • People in Northern Ireland were reluctant to use proxy voting because they need a reason to vote differently, unlike in Great Britain • Some younger and more disengaged people had never heard of it. Among those who had tried it, a few felt the registration process was complex. |

Elections and voting systems across the UK

| Country | Elections | Voting systems |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| England | UK Parliamentary General election Local council elections Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) election Combined Authority Mayor and local Mayor election London-wide Assembly Members Constituency Assembly Members EU Referendum | First-past-the-post – used for UK Parliamentary General, constituency members and local council elections Supplementary vote (SV) – used for mayoral and PCC elections and local council elections’ Additional member system (AMS) – used for London-wide list |
| Wales | UK Parliamentary General election Senedd / Welsh Parliament election Local council elections Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) election EU Referendum | First-past-the-post – used for UK Parliamentary General elections and council local elections Additional member system (AMS) – used for Senedd / Welsh Parliament elections Supplementary vote (SV) – used for mayoral and PCC elections |
| Scotland | UK Parliamentary General election Scottish Parliament election Local council elections Scottish Independence Referendum EU Referendum | First-past-the-post – used for UK Parliamentary General elections and local council elections Additional member system (AMS) – used for Scottish Parliament elections |
| Northern Ireland | UK Parliamentary General election Northern Ireland Assembly election Local elections EU Referendum | First-past-the-post – used for UK Parliamentary General elections Single transferable vote (STV) – used for the Northern Ireland Assembly and local council elections |

Sample breakdown

Depth Interviews (x 48)

The depth interviews were weighted towards those with additional needs e.g. communication needs, accessibility needs and low digital confidence.

| Characteristic | | Sample size |
|----------------------|---|-------------|
| Nation | England | 16 |
| | Scotland | 16 |
| | Northern Ireland | 7 |
| | Wales | 9 |
| Gender | Female | 26 |
| | Male | 22 |
| Ages | 16-17 | 3 |
| | 18-25 | 5 |
| | 26-40 | 6 |
| | 41-60 | 26 |
| | 61+ | 8 |
| Socio economic group | AB | 2 |
| | C1 | 29 |
| | C2 | 7 |
| | DE | 10 |
| Ethnicity | Ethnic minorities | 12 |
| Accessibility needs | Learning disability and/or autism spectrum disorder | 6 |
| | Mental health issues resulting in additional needs (e.g. anxiety and phobias) | 8 |
| Communication needs | Visual / hearing impairment | 4 |
| | English as second language | 3 |
| | Welsh language preference | 2 |
| | Low literacy | 4 |
| Digital Inclusion | Low confidence with digital technology and internet use | 18 |
| | Digitally excluded | 12 |

Focus groups (x 50 with 5-6 people per group)

The focus group sessions were grouped by nation, SEG and age.

| Characteristic | | Sample size |
|----------------------|---|-------------|
| Nation | England | 101 |
| | Scotland | 79 |
| | Northern Ireland | 44 |
| | Wales | 49 |
| Gender | Female | 135 |
| | Male | 138 |
| Ages | 16-17 | 12 |
| | 18-25 | 67 |
| | 26-40 | 54 |
| | 41-60 | 77 |
| | 61+ | 63 |
| Socio economic group | AB | 45 |
| | C1 | 90 |
| | C2 | 83 |
| | DE | 55 |
| Ethnicity | Ethnic minorities | 46 |
| Accessibility needs | Learning disability and/or autism spectrum disorder | 1 |
| | Mental health issues resulting in additional needs (e.g. anxiety and phobias) | 9 |
| | Mobility restrictions/ Physical disabilities | 27 |
| Communication needs | Visual / hearing impairment | 3 |
| | English as second language | 8 |
| | Welsh language preference | 2 |

Focus group and depth interview high level discussion flow

Focus groups were weighted towards either information or modernisation. Depth interviews followed the same flow but addressed both information and modernisation in greater detail.

| Topic | Objectives of the discussion |
|---|--|
| Motivation to vote and importance of voting | Objective: To understand respondents' motivation to vote |
| What should voting be like? What's an ideal voting experience? | Objective: to understand what role they think voting should play in society and start to identify principles of a good voting experience and the qualities they value. |
| The voting journey | <p>Objective: to understand pain points relating to the current experience and to identify people's unmet needs (including needs that are due to specific personal characteristics)</p> <p>Talking through each stage of the voting journey in detail, choosing either postal or in-person voting based on the group's experience.</p> |
| EITHER 1) Exploring further into information | <p>Objective: to explore respondents' information needs, including content, channel and tone of information</p> <p>Asking which types of information people look for around elections and what information is necessary for them to vote and using examples of existing information to understand their preferences.</p> <p>Sorting the following types of information about elections by how necessary they are and how easy they are to find:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ways available to cast a vote • How to vote (e.g. where to go, what to take, how to mark the ballot) • How the winner gets elected • What the election is for (e.g. local, general) • Which candidates or parties are standing for the election • Key differences between candidates or parties • Key issues at the election • Previous election results |
| OR 2) Exploring further into modernisation | <p>Objective: Understanding perceptions and appeal of potential voting options, probing into why they are or aren't appealing - to uncover needs and principles around voting.</p> <p>Showing respondents images of different modernisation options, probing around their immediate opinions, the advantages and disadvantages, and how they think each option would work.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advance voting • Mobile polling stations • Choose where to vote • All-postal • Online voting • E-Voting • Text voting |