

Politicians off target in communicating with British voters young and old

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Telewest Business' nationwide study spotlights need for elected officials to undertake better targeted communication with their communities

British politicians are off target in their efforts to communicate with the voting public to gain their support, according to a major nationwide study by Telewest Business. Voters were questioned from communities across the UK and while the younger age group was most likely to turn a blind eye to politicians unless contacted online, a different approach was required for older voters.

With a UK General Election looming, the Telewest Business E-Politics Study examined the voting public's general awareness of their local MP and how they felt about their involvement in politics overall. The intention was not just to assess views of MP to electorate communications, but of how Britain wants to engage with all politicians.

Overall, the study indicated that a communication gap exists between MPs and the communities who elect them, a problem that is particularly acute amongst younger constituents. While more than three quarters of the 3,150 people questioned had voted in the last General Election, those aged less than 30 years were less likely to vote in the forthcoming General Election, with the highest concentration of people intending to vote being in the 55 to 60 years age group.

However, younger voters in particular were more encouraged to vote if they could do so online. The older age bracket was far more reluctant to participate in politics online though, with just 7 per cent being encouraged by the prospect of e-voting and the likelihood of wanting to be in email dialogue with politicians decreasing progressively with age. This demonstrates a need for politicians to be more strategic and more specific about their communication with voting communities.

"The message is clear for MPs and councillors – politicians need to be better connected with their communities and consider factors such as age in doing so. Essentially, they need a better business plan for sustained communication with the electorate," said Christopher Small, Director of Public Sector for Telewest Business.

"Government has made significant strides in mobilising political interest through embracing new communications technologies. But the E-Politics Study shows that more needs to be done at both local and central government levels to bridge the communication gap, particularly with younger voters," he said.

On behalf of Telewest Business, researchers from Vision 21 questioned 3,150 members of the voting public about how they currently receive information about politics, how often they vote and whether they plan to vote in the next General Election. It also examined how they felt about using new communications technologies to become more involved with politics and politicians.

Other key findings of the study were:

- Nearly half of the respondents who said having the option of online voting would encourage them to vote were aged between 18 and 34 years, compared to only 7 in 100 people aged more than 55 years
- Younger voters were more likely to choose to email their local MP than those in the older age groups. They also preferred to receive news from their local MP online and communicate with them using email
- 18 to 34 year olds were more likely than other age brackets to vote for a MP who had contacted them personally, yet few people were able to assess how well their MP had communicated with them since the last General Election
- 38 per cent of all respondents would email their MP if they had their email address, and the young and males were most likely to do so

The telephone study was conducted during February 2005 amongst a random sample of 3,150 UK voters. Those surveyed were from different age groups and nine UK regions: south west England, south east England, London central and Greater London, eastern England, West Midlands, north west England, Yorkshire and Humberside, north east England and Scotland.

For further information, please go to www.telewest.co.uk/e-politics.

About Telewest Broadband:

Telewest, the broadband communications and media group, currently passes and markets to 4.7 million homes and provides multi-channel television, telephone and internet services to 1.76 million residential customers. Telewest Business, the company's business division, supplies broadband communications to the public and private sector markets. Its content division, Flextech, is the BBC's partner in UKTV. Together they are the largest supplier of basic channels to the UK pay-TV market with a portfolio that combines wholly owned and managed channels, including the nine joint venture channels with the BBC. For further information go to <http://mediacentre.telewest.co.uk>

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