



FIRST TIME VOTERS

Key findings from the qualitative
and quantitative research

“ I may go out and vote, although I don't think my vote will change anything. The voice of young people in the country is not heard. A few people lead the society and youth are not perceived as important. ”
Female, 18, Skopje

First Time Voters - Definition and Size

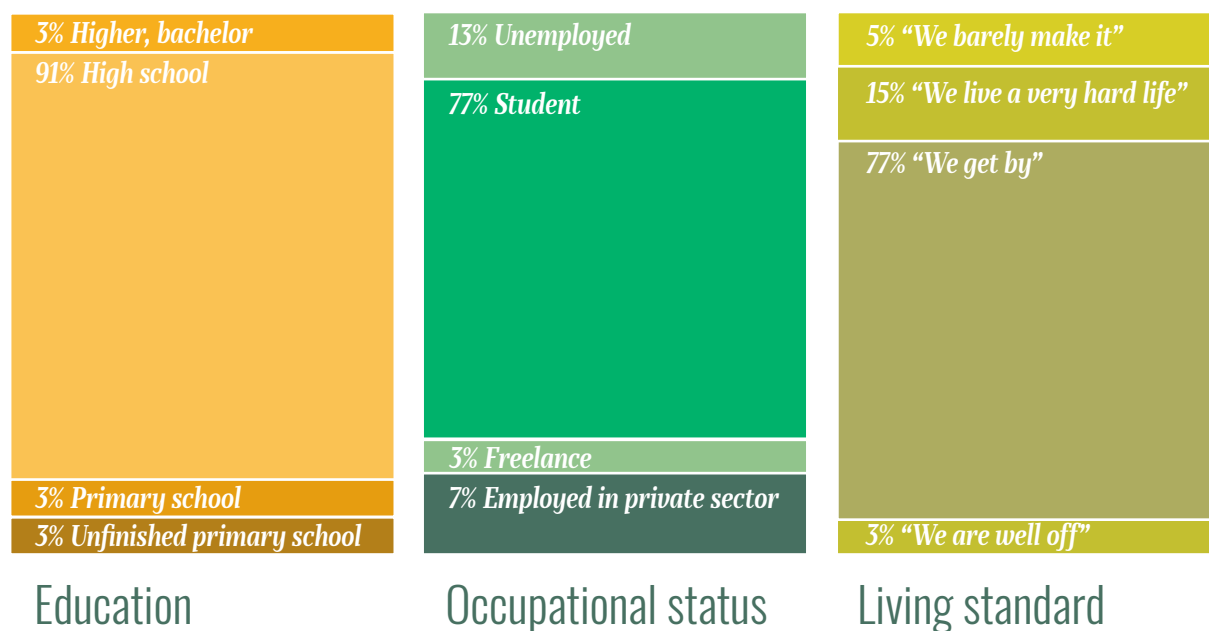
“First time voters” represent a group of young people of up to 20 years who have never voted at elections before.

They are a particularly important group in the electoral process due to their formative role in the democracy of tomorrow which is built on the habits of democratic participation of youth, including first time voters.

From a political perspective, successfully mobilizing first time voters has long-term rewards. Studies show that youth who participate in elections are more likely to continue voting later in life.¹⁰ When young people develop healthy civic habits, skills, and commitments, decision-making becomes more representative, communities benefit, and democracy prospers.

Civic participation of new generations of citizens is essential for democracies, including transitional democracies that struggle with engaging the young population in civic activities.

Demographic profile



¹⁰ Franklin, Mark N. Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-12, Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945

In addition, a total of 39 first time voters took part in the quantitative face-to-face survey. In order to gain an in-depth insight into the background, perceptions and opinions of the group, the quantitative survey was complemented by one focus group.

The demographic structure of the respondents shows a similar distribution by region, place of residence, gender, ethnicity, and standard of living to the general population.

TOPICS OF INTEREST

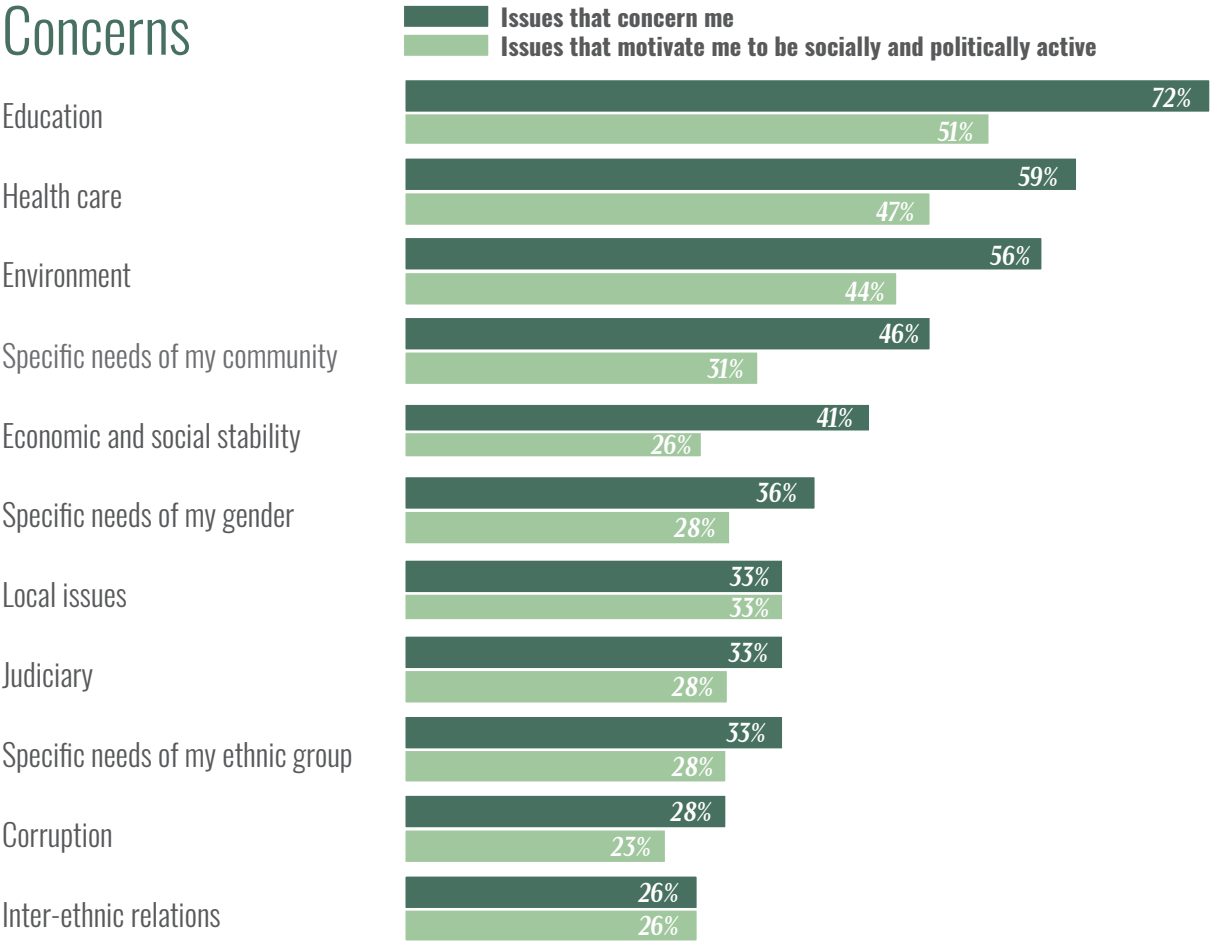
Interest in the socio-political developments in the country

How interested are you in the current socio-political developments in the country and in the world?



The research shows that almost 80% of the first time voters are not at all or not very interested in the current socio-political developments in the country or in the world. Nine out of ten respondents (87%) rarely or never discuss these issues with other people.

Concerns



Education, health care, and environment are the top three concerns that incentivise social and political participation of the first time voters.

While seven out of ten survey respondents cited education as the top area of concern, half of the respondents expressed interest in becoming socially and politically active on issues related to education.

Despite the high percentage of respondents concerned with these issues, they tend to be less motivated to be socially and politically active.

They are the least concerned with the specific needs of their ethnic group, corruption, and inter-ethnic relations.

The focus group findings show that this group is mostly interested in information concerning education, sports, music, and entertainment, and compared to the general population and other demographic groups, they are the least interested in socio-political developments.

INFORMATION SOURCES

Social media (Facebook and Instagram) are the predominant sources of information among the first time voters (54%). Three out of ten respondents state that they do not get informed about socio-political developments.



54%

There is no significant difference with regards to the interest and use of various sources of information across gender, ethnicity, and place of residence for this group.

Furthermore, the group indicated sporadic search for specific information and incidental consumption of information.

“ I am not really interested in politics. I sometimes read posts on Facebook, but in general, I don't consume such information. ”
Male, 18, Stip

“ I sometimes get updated on political issues in the country, but I'm not genuinely interested in it. I source information only from the social networks, such as Facebook and Instagram. I don't watch TV at all. ”
Female, 19, Prilep

CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Majority of the survey respondents have never been involved in any event, activity or process that could impact the community or their immediate surroundings, nor are interested in more active participation.

Compared with other demographic profiles, first time voters have the lowest civic involvement or interest in more effective participation in the community.

Have you been involved in any event, activity that could have affected any change in the community?



Do you have a desire for greater civic involvement?



The findings of the research show that absence of belief in positive change and lack of interest in civic engagement (both in NGOs or as an individual) are the main reasons for the continued low level of civic participation in socio-political life in the country.

The focus group participants state the following factors that contribute to the low levels of civic involvement and participation:

- ♦ Lack of will and perseverance among young people.
- ♦ Education system that does not stimulate students' civic participation.
- ♦ Family that does not nurture children to show proactive behavior.
- ♦ Lack of social acknowledgement, stimulation, and merit for youth activism.

“ The problem is rooted in the society itself, starting with the parents. They don’t teach their children how to approach the society. On another hand, good action should be rewarded by the society. ”

Female, 19, Prilep

Factors that promote involvement

Responsiveness of the institutional system is the key motivator for first time voters to be more involved in activities that could effectuate change in the community. This was cited by every fourth respondent in the quantitative survey. Other motivating factors are related to representation of their interests (cited by 18%) and personal or family benefits (cited by 15%).

First time voters urge the NGO sector to be more visible, involved, transparent, and active. NGOs can rely upon different media channels, primarily social media, to inform young people about current initiatives and activities and incentivise them to participate.

“ I think the NGOs should have more visible online presence or a more extensive network of organizations. Their initiatives should be more transparent. Facebook isn’t enough. They should use more portals or Instagram. ”

Female, 18, Skopje

Whereas two thirds of the citizens do not believe they can make any civic impact, 13% believe they can make a meaningful impact in their municipality, 8% in the parliament, 5% with regards to the decisions of the Prime Minister and 3% of the ministers.

Willingness and ability to participate in civic activities

With regards to participation in public life, 41% cited preference for opinion polling, 31% prefer brochures and leaflets as a source of information, 26% prefer direct meetings with colleagues and friends to discuss personal or family concerns, and 21% prefer online meetings or discussions.

In which of the civic activities are you willing to participate?

41%

Respond a questionnaire



31%

Read a brochure or a leaflet



26%

Meet colleagues, friends to discuss



ELECTION PROCESS

A broad negative perception about voting is prevalent among first time voters.

“Fictional”, “in vain”, “stagnation”, “no real choice”, “low turnout”, “invalid ballots”, “political pressure and blackmailing”, “fear among the citizens” are the most common associations for elections in the country among the participants in the focus group discussion.

*Do you think that every
vote counts and can
impact election results?*

49%

Yes

36%

No

15%

Does not know

A significant portion of respondents doubt the importance of citizens' vote and its impact on election results. The research shows that almost half of the respondents believe that every vote is important and can impact election results (49%), more than one third do not believe so (36%), while 15% claimed ignorant on the issue.

Half of the first time voters indicate that voting per se is not sufficient to engage citizens in policy making, three out of ten believe voting is sufficient, while two out of ten claimed ignorant on the issue.

Motivation to vote

Curiosity to experience the voting process for the first time is the dominant motivation for this group to go out and vote.

Nevertheless, the enthusiasm for voting, decision-making, and active participation in policy making is not high. The respondents indicated indifference, including belief that the citizen's vote does not have a significant impact and that election results are not reflective of the will of the people. The respondents indicate that young people are generally not interested in voting and that the initial enthusiasm diminishes over time.

“ I think that the family also has a great impact. If your parents don't vote on elections, that issue is no longer debatable at home. Politics is completely ignored because many parents are not satisfied with it. There seems to be a great division. Some families are helped by the party and all family members are employed, whereas some families survive on one salary. ”

Male, 17, Bitola

Furthermore, the research shows that the top three factors that influence first time voters' decision to vote are: prospects for better future (36%), fear that someone would steal their vote, i.e. vote instead of them (28%), and perception that voting is a civic right and duty (23%).

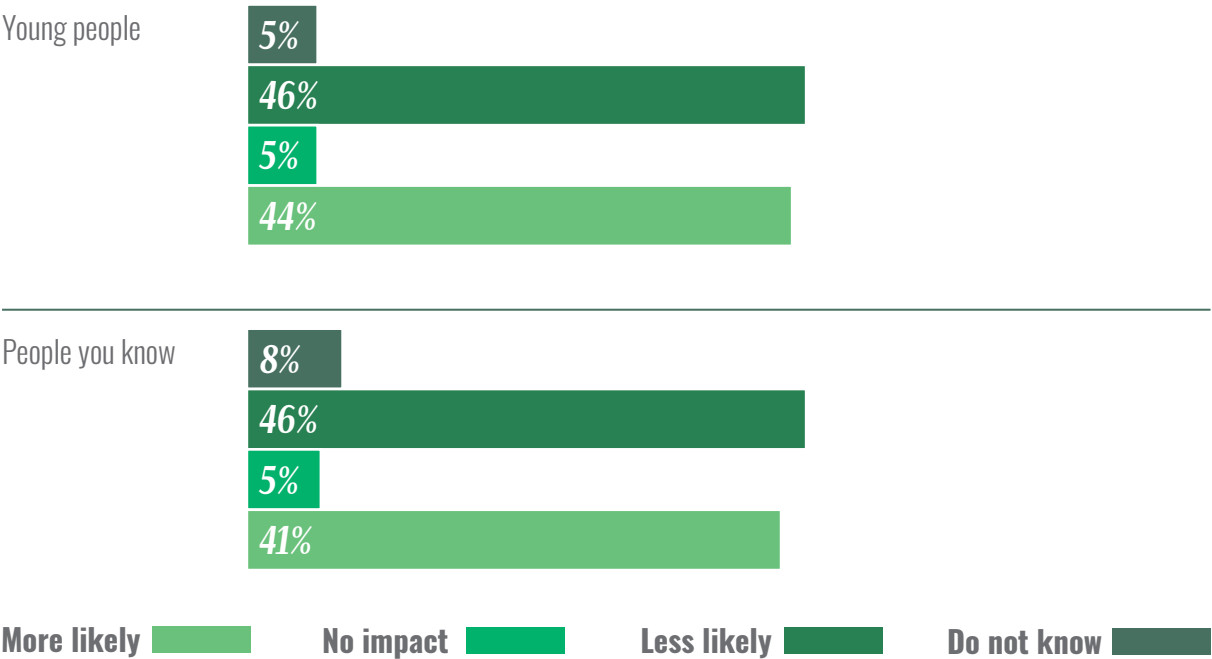
Family is another significant factor that affects the first time voters' turnout.

Half of the respondents indicate that their decision to vote is the same or most often the same as that of their families.



First time voters would like to see more youth representatives and people they know on the candidate lists.

If there are representatives of the following groups on the candidate lists, how likely is it that you would vote for that political party?



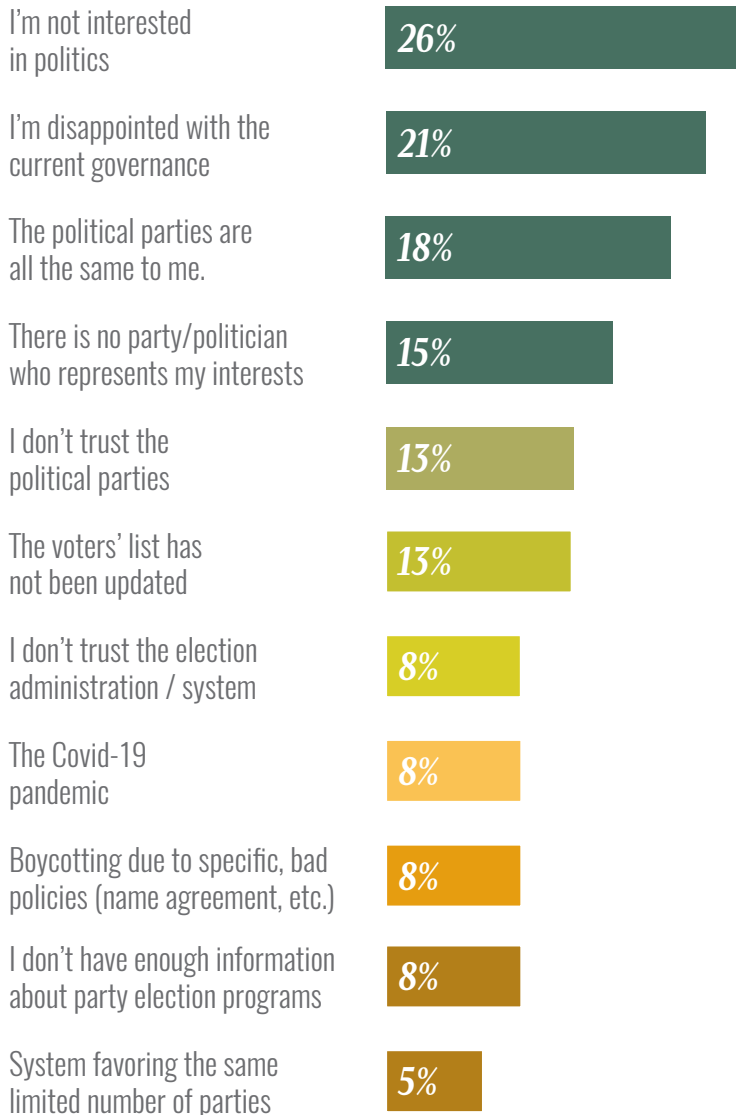
These findings are confirmed by the focus groups.

“ I think that if young people were into politics, political parties would definitely target us as voters instead of the pensioners. ”
Female, 18, Kumanovo

Demotivation to vote

Dissatisfaction with the incumbent government and the political parties, lack of interest in politics and lack of trust in the voter list are the key factors that influence first time voters' decision to abstain from voting.

What can influence your decision not to vote?



*“ There’s no one to vote for on elections.
I don’t like any of the candidates. ”*
Female, 19, Prilep

“ Young people are not interested in politics. There is no party we would vote for. We don't plan to stay and live in this country. We do not see a future here. ”

Female, 18, Skopje

“ These elections were hilarious. The party campaigns were comical. They go to such an extreme that they could not be more unrealistic. ”

Female, 19, Strumica

Low level of information and interest about the election process is prevalent among the first time voters.

Three out of ten first time voters know how to check their data on the voter list, while seven out of ten do not have this information.

COMMUNICATION WITH CANDIDATES AND PARTIES

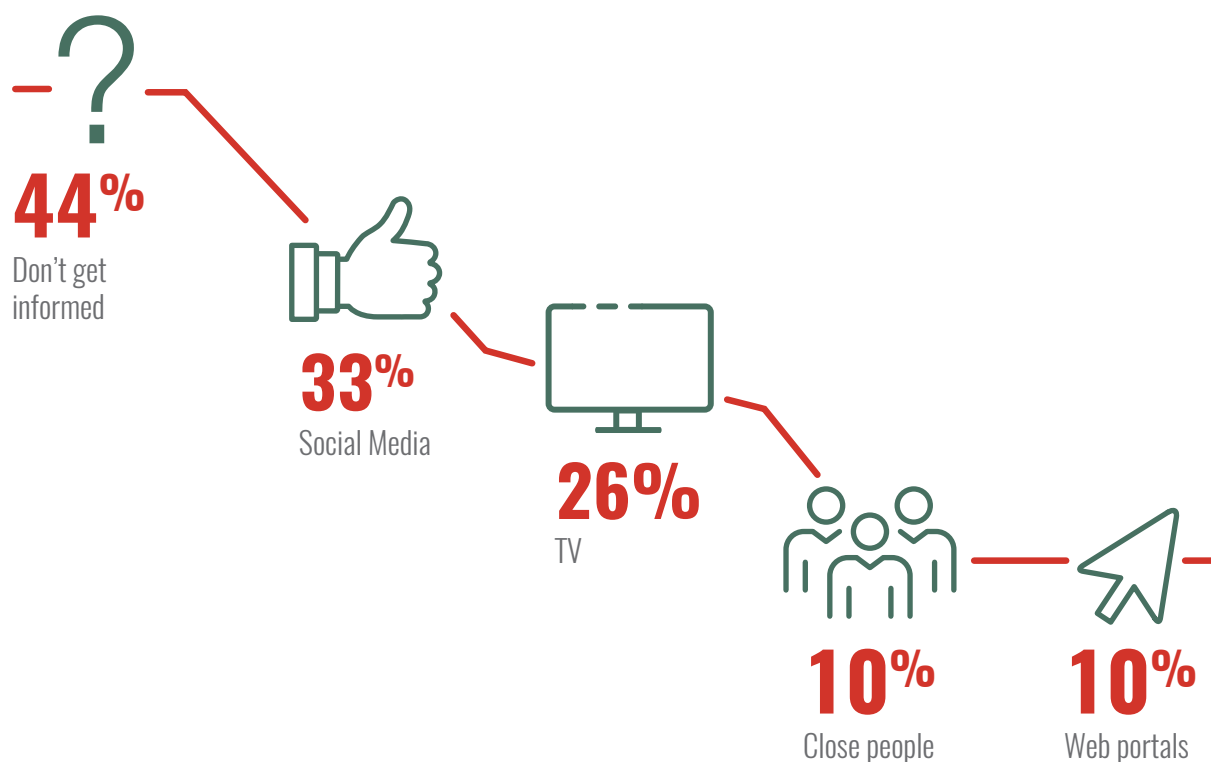
Social media (33%), TV (26%), web portals (10%), friends and family members (10%) are the predominant sources of election information.

Newscasts, adverts, and debates are the most cited ways of consumption of election information among the survey respondents. A significant part of them (44%) indicates that they do not follow elections.

The focus group findings show that first time voters are interested in voter education campaigns conducted via the social media, which is widely used by this category of people.

Social media and personal interaction are the preferable types of communication with candidates and elected representatives **between elections** and first time voters mostly rely on the candidates' political track record in making an informed decision.

Where do you get information about election?



BARRIERS

In view of their lack of previous experience in civic and political life, first time voters tend to demonstrate lower interest and willingness to participate in elections and activism compared to the youth in general. The barriers identified among the youth category in general (lack of knowledge, doubts in their impact, underrepresentation, availability of communication channels) are more pronounced among first time voters.

Specific barriers for this group are following:

- ♦ Poor knowledge and awareness about the overall voting process and specific election stages (voter list scrutiny, registration, etc.).
- ♦ Need for empowerment and buildup of skills and knowledge to navigate civic life more confidently.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to the recommendations referring to the youth in general, specific recommendations include:

Provide election information and education about access to the electoral process

- ♦ Create dedicated educational campaign providing necessary information for first time voters on voter registration, voter list scrutiny, voting procedures, etc.
- ♦ Use tailored tools and communication channels for effective outreach and delivery of messages: video tutorials, infographics or other visual presentations could be a good choice in view of the consumption preferences of this group. Communication should be largely online, using digital channels for precise targeting.
- ♦ Include youth representatives and experts in all phases of the voter information and education campaigns, to incorporate youth perspective in the design, evaluation, and validation of the activities.

Start early

Involve future voters into the democratic process early, before they reach voting age by arranging preregistration to facilitate voting or incentivize first time voters via text message, e-mail, or other communication channels specific to this group.

Increase the importance of the election process by focusing on the issues of their interest

Refer to education, health, and ecology, their role in the election process, positive examples of the civic participation impact and provide channels where they can express their opinions or address relevant topics. Details of possible activities are incorporated in the recommendations for the general youth group.

Create alliances

In addition to alliances with the media, creation of alliances with youth organizations and influencers are important to ensure mobilization of the first time voters. Partnering with micro-influencers relevant to different areas of young people's life is likely to increase their interest in the process and impact their willingness to engage.

Use the right communication channels

The current generation of first time voters are the first digital natives to be called to vote, thus their media habits are largely informed by the digital media, in particular the social media platforms. They are their main source of information and can be effective in incentivising personalized participation, based on their sentiments and conversations and establishing two-way communication channels.

Direct informal meetings can also be an effective vehicle for establishment of connections with first time voters, particularly if focused on relevant topics.

Effective communication outreach to young outgoing people can also be achieved by introducing artistic, cultural or sports activities and content.