Ontario Municipal Election 2026

Library Guide

Association of Municipalities of Ontario

democratic engagement exchange
at Toronto Metropolitan University

The Association of Municipalities of Ontario supporting efforts to increase voter turnout

This guide is part of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario's (AMO) broader campaign to improve the health of local democracies in Ontario. Through AMO's Board supported Healthy Democracy Project (HDP), AMO has, for the past four years, been working to support their members to:

- Improve the tone of political discourse;
- Help people understand the important role of local government and elected officials;
- Support AMO members to be equity-informed leaders;
- Encourage and support more people to run for local office; and
- Encourage more people to participate in local decision making.

One of the principal ways to engage in democracy is to vote and one of the most used ways to measure local democratic health is to track how many people turn up to vote.

All of the HDP initiatives over the past four years have been based in member engagement, new and existing research, strategic planning, testing, and then the subsequent development of practical tools, resources, and training.

In AMO's voter turnout research/resource, Turn Up the Turn Out, the central conclusion is that engaged and informed residents vote. If you wait until election time to motivate, you've waited too long. We also know that the decline in candidates running for office, both new and returning, matches and contributes to declining voter turnout.

Based on these central realities, AMO focused early efforts to understanding the barriers to running for office, and also into developing civic education resources for elected officials and educators.

Over the past four years, we've taken a step-by-step approach to improving the political environment and the understanding of its importance to local community vitality and quality of life. That includes the development of AMO's Leading with Respect Handguides, the introduction of a new series of training and resources for new and returning candidates, and a major public affairs campaign to encourage people to run and to vote in local elections.

We must recognize that the challenging trends we're facing in local elections and democracies have been growing over multiple election cycles and will require a sustained, sector-wide response. At the same time, we can also acknowledge the hopeful signs that more partners, community organizations, and institutions have committed to supporting local democracies.

The voter turnout resources developed and shared here from AMO are the result of four years of building knowledge, relationships, and partners. Elected officials, municipalities, civil societies, community groups, and institutions have been working, increasingly, over the past four years to engage prospective voters. These resources are designed to help finish the deal. To help move those voters to voting booths.

Please join us in this effort. Share these resources widely and take advantage of the tools and resources within.

What you will find in this guide

Libraries strengthen democracy in many different ways—from helping one patron find reliable voting information to bringing an entire community together. This guide offers practical ideas that can be adapted to the size, capacity, and character of your library. Start with one activity that fits your work, or use the guide to build a broader local election initiative.

1. Make trusted voting information easy to find

Help patrons understand whether they can vote and where, when, and how to do it. This section offers practical ways to make accurate local election information visible, accessible, and easy for library staff to share.

2. Turn an information display into an invitation

Create a display that does more than provide facts. Use books, official voting information, candidate resources, and engaging questions to help patrons connect the election with the future of their community.

3. Begin with a question—and listen

Invite patrons to share what they care about, what is working in their community, and what they want local leaders to address. This section shows how a simple question can open the door to civic participation and demonstrate that every community member has something valuable to contribute.

4. Bring voting to life with a Vote Pop-Up

Use a hands-on simulated voting activity to make the process more familiar and connect voting with the issues that matter to patrons. Vote Pop-Ups can be offered in a library lobby, an existing program, or an outreach event.

5. Bring the election into programs people already attend

Reach beyond the people who normally attend election events by adding a short activity, question, or information component to existing library programs. This section includes ideas for newcomer programs, youth and seniors' activities, book clubs, digital literacy workshops, and community outreach.

6. Curate a trusted local election guide

Bring reliable election information together in one place. This section suggests official sources, candidate information, local journalism, community events, and other resources that can help patrons make informed choices.

7. Help patrons navigate misinformation

Build simple source-checking and verification habits into displays, online resources, and existing digital literacy activities. The focus is on giving patrons practical tools they can use during the election and beyond.

8. Bring candidates and community together

Promote, host, or co-host opportunities for residents to learn about the people seeking to represent them. This section includes options ranging from sharing information about local debates to organizing an accessible candidate forum in partnership with community organizations or local media.

9. Create space for thoughtful community conversations

Support residents in listening, learning, and disagreeing respectfully. This section offers approachable program ideas, examples of libraries already doing this work, and links to tested facilitation resources.

Reach beyond the usual audience

Make participation welcoming and meaningful for people who may not normally see themselves included in election activities. This section highlights language, disability access, outreach, community partnerships, and other considerations for reaching new and infrequent voters.

Choose the role that fits your library

Not every library needs to do everything. This final section organizes the ideas into three possible levels of involvement: starting with trusted information, building participation, and becoming a local democracy hub.

Libraries Make Democracy Stronger

Practical ways to support participation in Ontario's 2026 municipal elections

Libraries put democratic values into practice every day.

They are open to everyone. They protect access to knowledge. They create places where people of different ages, backgrounds and experiences can learn, connect and share a community. For a newcomer, a library card can be an early sign that they belong. For a young person, a library can open a world of possibilities. For someone trying to make sense of a complicated issue, a librarian can be a trusted guide.

These qualities make libraries essential democratic institutions.

That role is especially important now. Voter turnout in municipal elections has been falling. Local news has become harder to find in many communities. Misleading information spreads quickly online. Too many people feel disconnected from public life or uncertain that their participation will make a difference.

Libraries can help change that.

During an election, libraries can help residents:

- Connect the issues they care about with the decisions made by local elected leaders.
- Find accurate and accessible information about voting.
- Learn about the people seeking to represent them.
- Build the confidence to ask questions and make their own choices.
- Meet neighbours and take part in respectful community conversations.
- Feel that local democracy belongs to them.

This guide is an invitation to build on what libraries already do exceptionally well: share knowledge, welcome people in and strengthen community.

Non-partisan does not mean passive.

Libraries can actively encourage residents to learn, participate, and vote while remaining firmly non-partisan. Provide accurate information, treat candidates and viewpoints fairly and consistently, and give patrons the tools to make their own decisions. Answering questions about where, when, and ways to vote is non-partisan—and strengthens democracy.

Nine ways libraries can strengthen local democracy

1. Make trusted voting information easy to find

One of the most important things a library can do is make accurate election information visible, understandable and easy to use.

Use the project's **Where, When, and Ways to Vote** information sheet as a starting point. Work with the municipal clerk or elections office to make sure the local details are correct.

Help patrons find out:

- Whether they are eligible to vote.
- When voting begins and ends.
- Where and how they can vote.
- What identification they may need.
- How to check or update their information on the voters' list.
- What accessible voting options are available.
- Who to contact when they need more help.

Share this information at service desks, on the library website, through newsletters and social media, on digital screens, and wherever patrons naturally pause.

A short staff reference sheet can help library employees answer common questions confidently. When an answer depends on someone's individual circumstances—or is unclear—staff can connect the patron with the municipal clerk or elections office.

2. Turn an information display into an invitation

Create a welcoming, visible election display that helps residents see the connection between local government and everyday life.

Bring together:

- A plain-language explanation of what mayors or reeves, councillors, and school board trustees do.
- Information about services and decisions shaped by municipal government.
- Official local voting information.
- The certified list of candidates.
- Information about candidate forums and community events.
- Books and resources about local history, government, democracy, and media literacy.
- QR codes linking to official and trusted online sources.

The display should do more than provide facts. It should invite curiosity.

Possible headings include:

- *Your Community. Your Voice. Your Vote.*
- *Who Makes Decisions About Our Community?*
- *What Do You Want Local Leaders to Hear?*
- *Local Democracy Starts Here.*

Keep the display current throughout the election and remove outdated voting or campaign information promptly.

3. Begin with a question—and listen

People are more likely to become interested in an election when the conversation begins with their lives rather than with political institutions.

Ask:

- *What is one thing you would like to improve in our community?*
- *What should local leaders be talking about?*
- *What is working well here that you want to protect?*
- *What would make it easier for people in this community to participate?*

Patrons can respond through sticky notes, a paper ballot, an ideas wall, a jar, a digital survey, or a community map.

Library staff can group the answers into broad themes such as housing, transportation, recreation, community safety, services, the environment, or affordability. The results can inform an information display, library program, candidate forum, or community conversation.

The most important part is not the technology or the final tally. It is the act of asking—and demonstrating that people's experiences and priorities matter.

4. Bring voting to life with a Vote Pop-Up

A **Vote Pop-Up** turns election information into an experience.

Participants reflect on what matters to them, choose an issue on a simulated ballot and practise placing that ballot in a box. They do not vote for actual candidates. Instead, the activity connects community priorities with the process of voting.

A Vote Pop-Up can:

- Make an unfamiliar process feel approachable.
- Start conversations about local issues.
- Help patrons understand why municipal elections matter.
- Create a natural opportunity to share official voting information.
- Reach people who might never attend a formal election event.
- Add energy and participation to an existing program or community gathering.

Run one in the library lobby, during a branch program, at a community festival, through a youth program, or with an outreach partner.

Library employees, volunteers, students, youth leaders, and community partners can all help deliver the activity after receiving training.

Current Vote Pop-Up materials are available through the Democratic Engagement Exchange's Election Readiness Toolkit. Additional Ontario municipal election resources and training will be available through the **Voice the Vote** website.

5. Bring the election into programs people already attend

A stand-alone event about municipal government may attract people who are already interested in politics. Libraries can reach much further by incorporating election information and activities into programs that already bring people together.

Possible opportunities include:

- Newcomer and language-learning programs.
- Youth and teen programs.
- Seniors' programs.
- Digital literacy workshops.
- Book clubs.
- Local history programs.
- Employment, settlement and community services.
- School visits.
- Mobile library and outreach programs.
- Cultural events, performances and community celebrations.

The contribution can be simple: a five-minute conversation, one good question, a voting-information handout, or a short Vote Pop-Up activity.

This approach allows libraries to meet people in programs and relationships where they already feel comfortable. It also recognizes that someone who would never register for an "election workshop" may be very willing to talk about what they want for their neighbourhood, family, or community.

Work with organizations that have trusted relationships with communities that may face barriers to participation. Invite partners to help shape the language, format, timing, and location—not simply to promote a program after it has already been designed.

6. Curate a trusted local election guide

In a crowded and confusing information environment, curation is a democratic service.

Create a short print or online guide that brings reliable local election information together in one place. Include:

- The municipality's official election website.
- Contact information for the municipal clerk or elections office.
- The official list of certified candidates.
- Candidate websites and publicly available campaign information.
- Standardized candidate profiles or trusted candidate-comparison resources, where available.
- Candidate forums, debates and community events.
- Recordings of completed local forums.
- Credible local journalism and community news sources.
- Information about municipal responsibilities and school boards.
- Media and digital literacy resources.

Where a reputable, non-partisan **Vote Compass** or similar issue-comparison tool is available, include it. Briefly explain who created the tool, how the results are generated, and that it is one resource to help people reflect on their views—not a recommendation about how to vote.

Clearly distinguish among official election information, material supplied by candidates, independent journalism, and analysis.

7. Help patrons navigate misinformation

Libraries already help people evaluate sources and find reliable information. During an election, build a few simple verification habits into displays, resource guides, digital literacy programs, and conversations with patrons.

Encourage people to:

- Look for the original source rather than relying on a screenshot or repost.
- Check who created the information and when.
- Confirm voting details through the municipality.
- Compare important claims with other credible sources.
- Distinguish news reporting, opinion, analysis and campaign communication.
- Pause before sharing material designed to provoke an immediate emotional reaction.

This does not need to become a separate, heavily promoted workshop. A short handout, an online feature, or an election example added to an existing digital literacy program may reach more people.

8. Bring candidates and community together

Libraries are natural places for residents to learn about the people seeking to represent them.

Libraries can:

- Promote candidate forums and debates organized by trusted community partners.
- Provide an accessible and familiar venue.
- Co-host an event with local media or community organizations.
- Host a meet-and-greet, structured conversation, formal question-and-answer event or debate.
- Invite patrons to propose questions.
- Livestream or record an event.
- Make recordings and written candidate responses available afterward.
- Host a viewing event for a forum being held elsewhere.
- Create an information area where patrons can review material from all candidates under clear and consistent rules.

Candidate events should be designed for more than the residents who already attend political meetings. Consider language and disability access, transportation, timing, the needs of parents and families, online participation, and partnerships that can help bring new voices into the room.

Treat candidates fairly and apply clear rules consistently. Libraries planning an event can use the companion **Candidate Forum Guide** for detailed advice on formats, invitations, accessibility, moderation, promotion, and follow-up.

9. Create space for thoughtful community conversations

Libraries can help communities practise something democracy urgently needs: listening, learning, and disagreeing without treating one another as enemies.

This work can be valuable, but it should not be improvised. Libraries should choose a format that matches their capacity, work with experienced facilitators or community partners where possible, and establish clear expectations for participation.

Civility does not mean avoiding difficult subjects, muting strong opinions, or asking people to surrender their principles. It means making room for honest disagreement while maintaining respect for the people involved and for the democratic process itself.

Begin with an approachable format

A library does not need to start with the community's most divisive issue. Possible entry points include:

- **What do we want for our community?**
  Invite residents to discuss their hopes for the community, the challenges standing in the way, and what local action could make a difference.
- **How does council decide?**
  Invite a municipal clerk, journalist, former elected official, or local government expert to explain how an issue moves from community concern to staff report, council debate, and decision.
- **Books, film and democracy**
  Use a book, documentary or podcast to open a discussion about belonging, disagreement, public service, local leadership, or democratic participation.
- **Behind the headline**
  Explore how different sources frame the same local issue and how residents can evaluate competing claims.
- **A community agreement for election conversations**
  Ask patrons how they want candidates, institutions, and residents to treat one another during the election. Turn their answers into a public display or set of shared commitments.

Learn from libraries already doing this work

Ontario and Canadian libraries have developed programs that demonstrate several possible approaches:

- Toronto Public Library's On Civil Society series brings authors, experts and residents together to explore democracy, civic engagement, and important public issues.
- Toronto Public Library's Celebrate Democracy and Civic Life programming connects civic learning with thoughtful dialogue and community participation.
- Oakville Public Library's Community Conversations series combines programs, community partnerships, reading lists, and resources to support discussion of social issues and polarizing topics.
- Burlington Public Library has hosted public conversations about democracy, intellectual freedom, and the role of libraries, including its participation in the cross-country IDEAS for a Better Canada library series.

Use tested guidance

Libraries considering a more challenging or potentially polarizing conversation can draw on:

- The American Library Association's Dialogue and Deliberation Resources for Libraries, which includes facilitation guides, conversation models, and training specifically created for libraries.
- The ALA's Reflective Structured Dialogue resources, developed with Essential Partners for conversations involving deeply held differences.
- The free Living Room Conversations library webinar and resources, which offer a structured, adaptable format and ready-to-use discussion guides.

Whatever the format, set expectations at the beginning. Encourage participants to challenge ideas rather than attack people, listen to understand, avoid assumptions about others' motives, and remain curious about experiences different from their own.

Reach beyond the usual audience

An election program is not truly accessible simply because everyone is permitted to attend. Reaching new and infrequent voters requires intention.

Consider:

- Offering information in languages commonly used in the community.
- Using plain language and readable design.
- Providing print, digital, audio, and large-print formats.
- Involving people with disabilities in planning activities and events.
- Taking programs outside the main branch through mobile and community outreach.
- Holding activities at different times.
- Working with settlement organizations, Indigenous organizations, disability groups, youth groups, schools, seniors' organizations, settlement agencies and neighbourhood associations.
- Inviting community partners to host or facilitate in their own languages and styles.
- Providing clear information about accessibility, transportation, online participation and other supports.

Do not assume that someone who has never voted is uninterested. They may have lacked information, confidence, an invitation or a sense that the process included them.

Choose the role that fits your library

Every library can contribute. The work can grow from a single display to a community-wide initiative.

Start with trust

- Share the **Where, When, and Ways to Vote** information sheet.
- Create an election display.
- Prepare staff with trusted reference information.
- Add official election links to the library website.

Build participation

- Ask patrons what matters to them.
- Run Vote Pop-Ups.
- Add election information to existing programs.
- Create a local election resource guide.
- Incorporate election examples into media and digital literacy activities.

Become a local democracy hub

- Host or co-host candidate events.
- Convene conversations about local priorities.
- Partner with trained facilitators to support respectful dialogue.
- Build partnerships that reach beyond the usual election audience.
- Continue civic learning and community conversations after voting day.

Democracy happens here

In a world crowded with misinformation, libraries are trusted guides to knowledge.

At a time of isolation and division, libraries create connection and belonging.

When people doubt whether their voices matter, libraries can invite them into a conversation, help them find reliable information, and remind them that they have something valuable to contribute.

Every question answered, every issue named, every new voice welcomed, and every respectful conversation strengthens the civic fabric of a community.

Libraries are not simply places where people read about democracy.

Libraries are places where democracy is practised.

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