

TURN UP THE TURNOUT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Voter turnout is the lifeblood of a healthy and vibrant democracy. Yet, in the 2022 municipal elections in Ontario, less than a third of eligible voters participated – a record low.

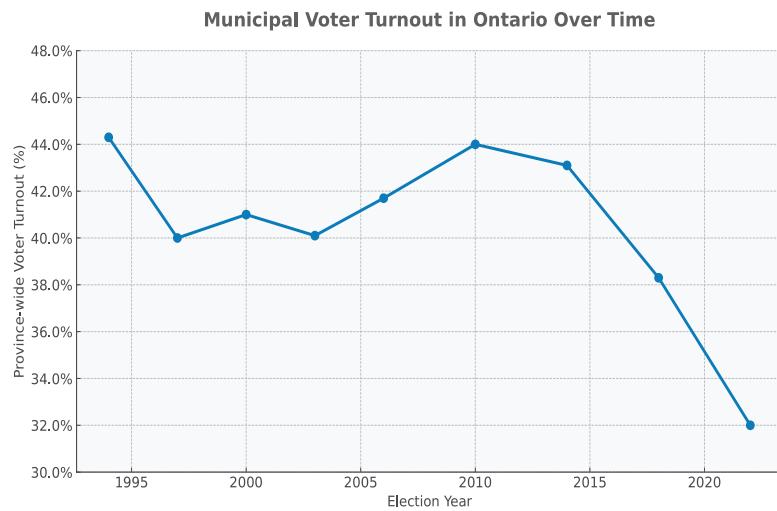
Municipalities across Ontario recognize this challenge and, in response, have made voting more convenient overall. Despite these efforts, voter turnout at the municipal level has continued to decline. So, what is the solution? How do we motivate people to vote, and how do we address barriers to voting?

We know that increasing voting convenience has not solved voter turnout decline.

Motivating voters to cast a ballot needs to be our collective focus if we're going to turn the tables on low turnout. Through *Turn up the Turnout* and other resources, The Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) and its members are working together to improve voter engagement.

Through AMO's Healthy Democracy Project, *Turn Up the Turnout* is another resource designed to support AMO members, help people understand the important role of their local government, and understand how their voice and votes matter. AMO recognizes there is no silver bullet – a sector-wide, comprehensive approach is needed to overcome the complex challenges that shape voter behaviour.

This report is meant to complement other AMO resources and research, and help to equip policymakers, civil society leaders, politicians, and citizens with evidence-based strategies to increase voter turnout.



These are the core groups of stakeholders who play a role – both in increasing motivation and reducing barriers to vote.

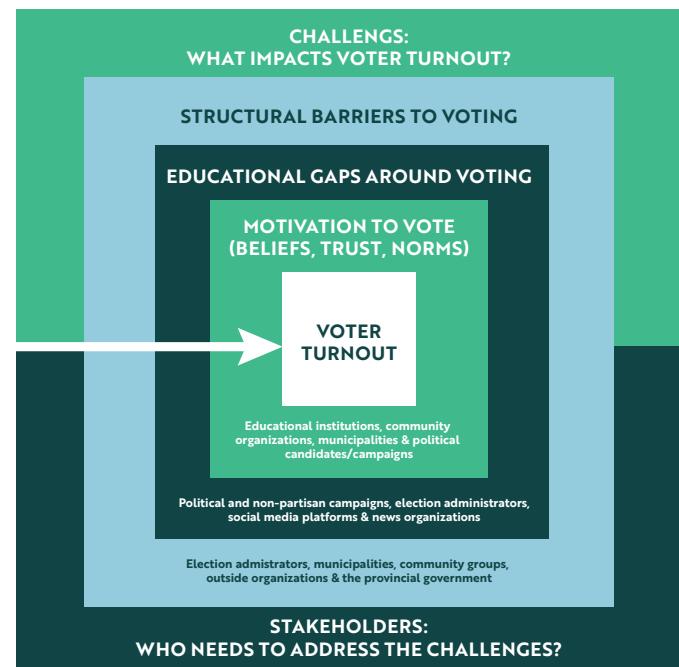
Stakeholders

- Governments and elections administrators
- Civil society groups
- Media outlets and social media platforms
- Advocacy and community groups
- Candidates and Campaigns
- Academic and public institutions
- Individuals

How do we motivate people to vote?

Empathy is a key first step to improving voter turnout, especially with communities that haven't historically participated in municipal elections. Empathy includes both understanding the reasons that pull voters to participate in an election and understanding the ways campaigns and candidates push people to vote, such as:

- A sense of civic duty
- An interest in politics
- Trust in the political system
- A desire to change policy
- Alignment with community norms that encourage participation



Evidence-based solutions begin from these understandings: that all people have individual and environmental motivations to vote, and as stakeholders, we must engage with these reasons to meaningfully impact voter turnout.

Strengthening beliefs, trust and norms

Civic Education Programs for Youth:

Research shows that youth who start voting as soon as they're eligible are more likely to keep voting. Offering kids hands-on civic education programs that inform them about the important role of municipal government helps foster lifelong participation in local democracy.

Community-Based Initiatives:

Creating a culture of participation in your community is key. Efforts include supporting local media, empowering groups that represent underrepresented communities, and simplifying involvement in local government.

Policies Encouraging Civic Engagement:

It's not only what you do during elections to get people to participate. It's also about keeping momentum between elections.

AMO and CIVIX's [Municipal Rep Day Resources](#), which connects students, educators, and local officials to build civic awareness and real-world understanding of local government.

For example, [Apathy is Boring created RISE](#), a 15-week program aimed at promoting youth involvement in their communities and in local decision-making.

The Town of Innisfil created an [Electoral Engagement Advisory Committee](#) to keep residents involved in local government year-round and excited to vote in future elections.

Strengthening Campaigns and Supporting Candidates

Although municipalities and non-partisan organizations can't directly shape campaigns or recruit candidates, their policies, community engagement style, programs and events can impact who decides to run and how they operate their campaign. Some ways to strengthen campaigns include:

Candidate forums and debates:

When we offer spaces for people to hear from and ask questions to candidates, we help increase voters' understanding of complex issues and policies, and we directly connect them to the democratic and electoral process.

Increasing the number of candidates running and seeking re-election:

More candidates may mean greater diversity of opinion and more competitive races. In turn, this may allow voters who otherwise feel unrepresented to have a candidate they can support. Many organizations, like Politics NOW and ElectHER Now, offer support to get candidates started. Municipalities can support these efforts by offering links to local resources on their websites.

Providing candidate support to people from underrepresented groups:

By providing direct support to candidates from underrepresented communities, identity-based national organizations and local campaign schools, can encourage people to run for office who might have never done so otherwise. This includes organizations like Operation Black Vote Canada and The Canadian Muslim Vote.

Improving voter access to candidates' experience and policies:

Public organizations like libraries are well-positioned to provide voters with trusted sources of information about candidates' electoral platforms, election priorities, and relevant experience to deepen their understanding of individual candidates. The Local Candidate Tracker is where voters can find reported, fact-checked information about every Toronto candidate for mayor, councillor, and school trustee for each ward. Learn more [here](#).

How do we reduce barriers to voting?

Structural Barriers

Fixing structural barriers to voting takes an all-hands-on-deck approach to change policies and procedures to make voting more convenient, sometimes requiring provincial approval or changes in the Municipal Elections Act. Some solutions include:

- **Advanced voting days:** providing voters with additional days to cast a ballot before election day.
- **Different voting methods:** providing voters with an "alternative" way to cast a ballot like internet voting, voting by mail, and telephone voting.
- **Poll locations:** providing ample polling locations in the form of floating polls that are mobile or change locations, "vote anywhere polls", or centralized voting centres.

- **Reassuring voters:** taking proactive steps to counter against anti-democratic actors and build trust in election integrity. For example, Élections Québec launched a creative digital and print ad campaign, partnering with young influencers, to increase engagement among voters aged 18-24. Learn more [here](#).

- **Targeted accessibility measures for underrepresented communities:** providing specific attention to groups that may have physical, spatial, or linguistic barriers to participation. For example, Collaboration with First Nations Chiefs and Métis Leaders to establish a process for Band members to provide proof of name and address. Learn more [here](#).

Educational Barriers

All voters need information about where, when, and ways to vote. Knowledge gaps can be addressed through outreach and awareness tactics for political and non-partisan campaigns, by election administrators, on social media platforms and through news organizations. Helpful strategies to reduce educational barriers might involve activities by candidates and organizations, such as:

Direct candidate-to-voter outreach:

Door-to-door canvassing, telephone calls, "mainstreeting" (handing out flyers, setting up a table and chair to answer questions, or visiting businesses), or direct social media contact have a proven impact on increasing voter turnout.

Indirect candidate-to-voter outreach:

This includes things like direct mailouts, advertising in traditional or social media, or campaign signs.

Non-partisan campaigns:

There are many non-partisan groups that care about closing knowledge gaps for voters. They can provide independent information to support voters in considering who to vote for. These organizations can include:

- **Election administrators and non-partisan community groups** may develop materials like how-to guides for voters, digital and grassroots non-partisan information campaigns, or offer training and resources for community leaders to empower their constituents to vote.
- **Advocacy organizations** who raise awareness of the issues important to them and share that information with the general public, who may in turn find themselves aligned with that advocacy. As an example, organizer Diana Chan McNally put together a [one-page guide](#) for unhoused people to access the polls for the 2025 federal election.
- **Local media** who may run candidate profiles in local newspapers or an article comparing platforms of each candidate. Grassroots journalism organization [Ink-Stained Wretches](#) is an advocacy group dedicated to building a culture of appreciation for quality journalism in aid of democracy.



Next Steps:

Increasing voter turnout requires a coordinated, multi-faceted approach. The path forward requires trying new programs, measuring outcomes and refining approaches. By understanding and addressing the complex interplay of barriers and motivations, policymakers and stakeholders can develop more effective strategies to enhance democratic participation and ensure elections truly reflect the will of the citizenry.

The most important next step is taking a step at all, whether personally or organizationally. Making the choice to try one of these strategies in your community, reaching out to others you think would be collaborators and co-conspirators, and doing, trying and experimenting.

Click here to view the full report:



Prepared in collaboration with the Democratic Exchange at Toronto Metropolitan University