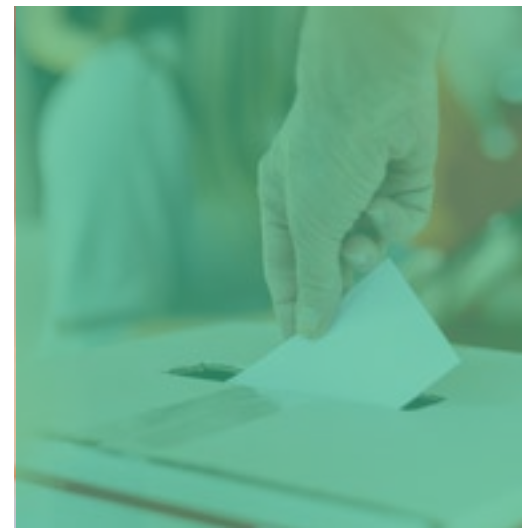


TURN UP ^{THE} TURNOUT

A RESOURCE ON VOTER PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL ELECTIONS



October 2025



AMO's Healthy Democracy Project

Voter turnout is a key indicator in the health of Ontario's municipal democracies. The Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) and its members are keenly interested in working to improve voter engagement and turnout. It improves local decision making and the long-term social and economic sustainability of our communities. In 2022, AMO's Board of Directors approved a Healthy Democracy Project aimed at:

- Attracting more diverse candidates to municipal office.
- Supporting elected officials to be equity-informed leaders.
- Promoting more respect for the people engaged in democratic processes.
- Encouraging greater participation in local democracy and an increase in voter turnout.
- Promoting greater civic engagement and greater awareness of the role of municipal government.

This resource is just one part of a program designed to support AMO members to better engage residents in their communities, help people understand the important role of their local government, and understand how their voice and votes matter.

Informed by AMO's primary research, *Turn Up the Turnout: A Resource On Voter Participation In Local Elections* aims to help AMO, its members, and partners across the sector, to develop strategies and initiatives to drive civic engagement efforts, increase voter motivation, improve voter access to information, and further identify ways to make voting easier and more appealing.

AMO recognizes that increasing resident engagement and voter turnout requires commitment, effort, and intention across the public sector. No single actor can fully enact the solutions and strategies outlined in this resource.



Working with other Healthy Democracy Project resources, AMO, its partners, community organizations and leaders can work together to swing the pendulum towards more civil dialogue, more engaged youth, and an overall increase in democratic engagement and ultimately voter turnout.

Healthy Democracy Project resources include:



- AMO's [Democratic Engagement Solutions Bank](#): a catalogue of resources designed to help communities in Ontario find practical ways to improve democratic and political participation.



- AMO's [Municipal Rep Day civic education resources](#): developed in partnership with CIVIX, the leading national civic education organization to support elected officials and educators, to help ignite interest in local government with future voters and community leaders.



- [Engaging Youth in Local Democracy](#): a resource that provides actionable recommendations for how elected officials, municipalities, and public sector institutions can better engage youth in their communities.



- Foundational, groundbreaking research: [Mapping the Experiences of Diverse Candidates Running for Municipal Office in Ontario](#).



- Ongoing [Healthy Democracy Forums](#) explore shared democratic challenges and solutions with elected officials, municipal staff, civil societies, sector partners, academics and more.

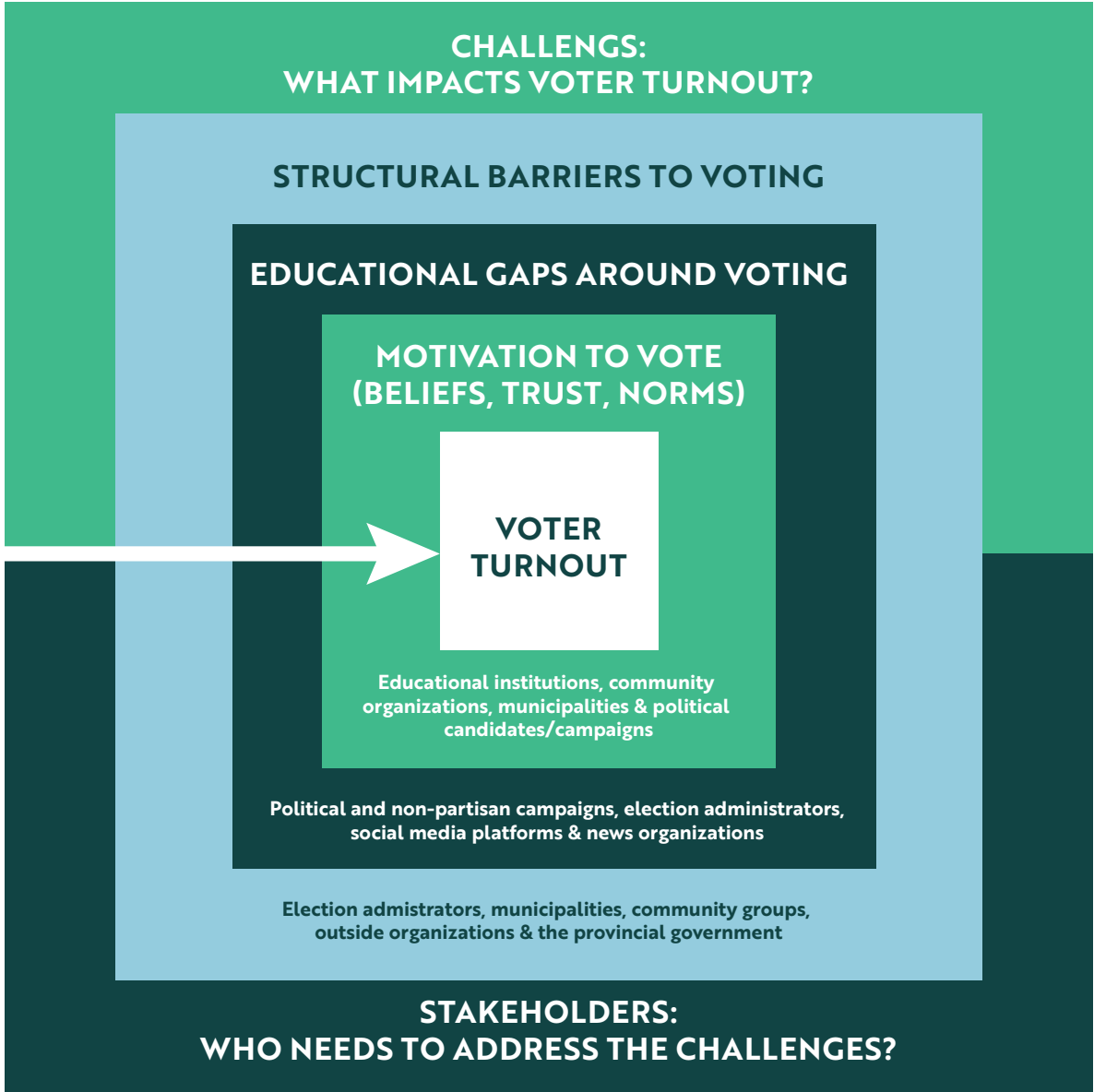


- Future work to support this work includes the development of a Municipal Civility and Anti-Harassment Strategy and a public affairs campaign aimed at increasing voter turnout and the attraction and retention of candidates for local office.

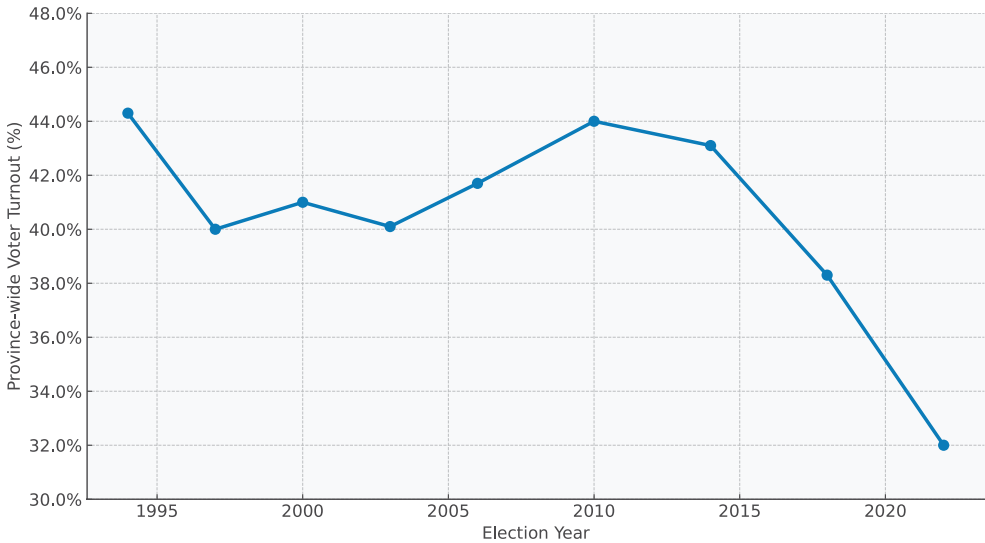


Introduction

The Reality of Voter Turnout



Municipal Voter Turnout in Ontario Over Time

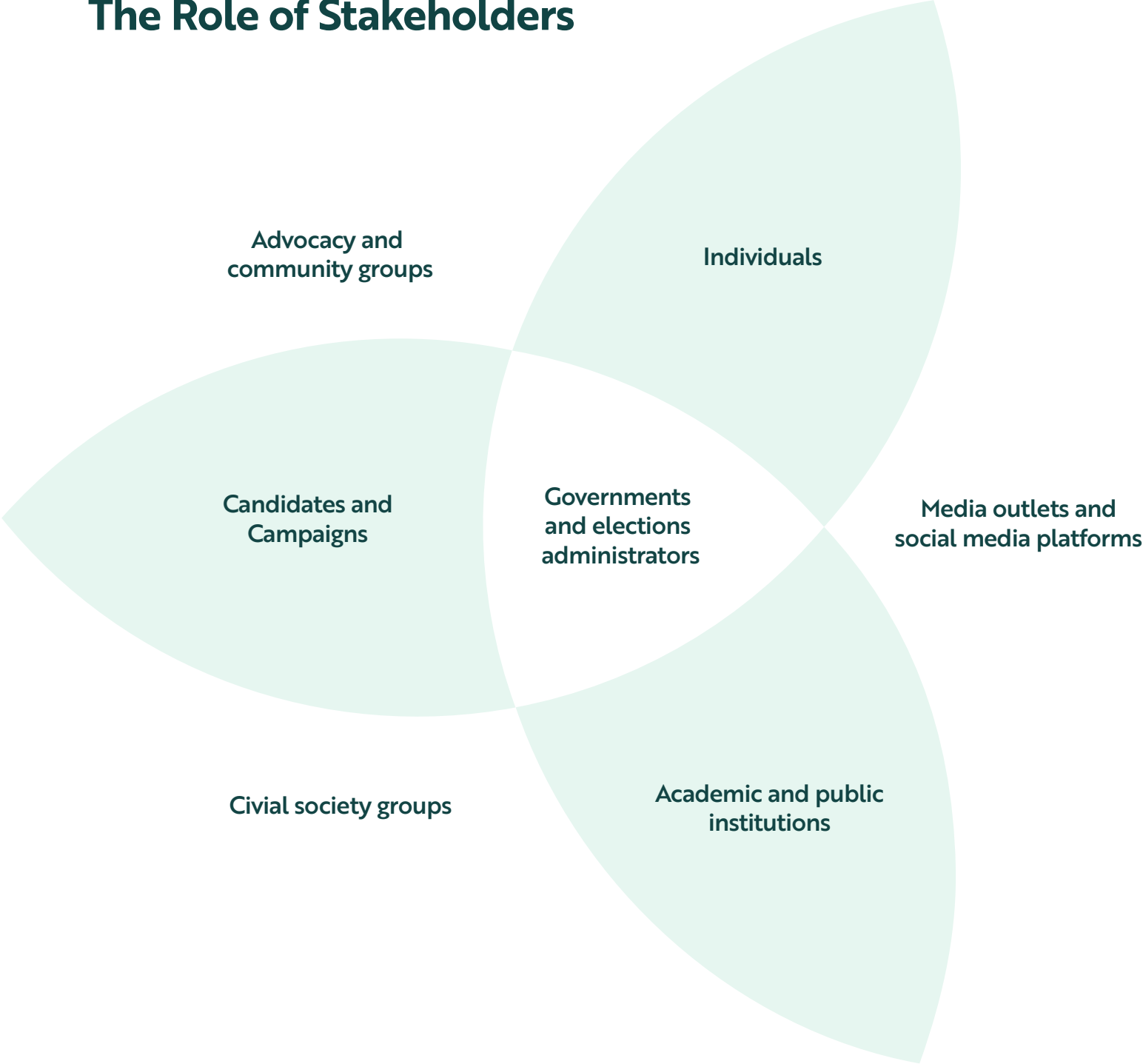


In 2022, Ontario experienced a record-low voter turnout in its municipal elections. Less than a third of eligible voters participated. From a municipal standpoint, local governments have made significant strides to reduce barriers by making it more convenient for people to vote, including more days, and alternative ways to cast a ballot. So, what is the solution?

This report, alongside other AMO resources and research, equips policymakers, civil society leaders, politicians, and citizens with evidence-based strategies to increase voter turnout. Drawing from a literature review, insights from two rounds of key informant workshops, and Toronto Metropolitan University's [Democratic Engagement Exchange](#) experience working to increase civic engagement across all levels of government, this resource addresses two key questions: How do we motivate people to vote? How do we address barriers to voting?

This framework provides the background necessary to evaluate solutions and consider what is required in implementing interventions.

The Role of Stakeholders



A sector-wide, comprehensive approach is needed to overcome the complex challenges that shape voter behaviour. These are the core groups of stakeholders who play a role in both increasing motivation and reducing barriers to voting:

- **Governments and elections administrators:** Can establish rules and procedures for elections, lead public education campaigns and administer elections.
- **Civil society organizations:** Can deliver non-partisan public education and engagement campaigns and host candidate forums.
- **Media outlets and social media platforms:** Can provide information about where, when, and ways to vote and a platform to learn about candidates.
- **Advocacy and community groups:** Can encourage voter turnout and provide information about candidates, often motivated by issue-focused or partisan objectives.
- **Candidates and campaigns:** Can encourage voter turnout by supporters and provide information about their positions and qualifications.
- **Academic and public institutions:** Can provide information about where, when, and ways to vote and a platform to learn about candidates. Can provide space for voting and candidate forums.
- **Individuals:** Can provide information about where, when and ways to vote and guidance on candidates and can encourage others to become interested and engaged.

Executive Summary

Voter turnout is the lifeblood of a healthy and vibrant democracy. It is one of the most public and important indicators of a robust public participation. Yet, in the 2022 municipal elections in Ontario, less than a third of eligible voters participated – a record low.

When voter turnout is high, it shows that people are engaged and inspired – either by a specific cause or competitive race – to express their views at the ballot box. When voter turnout is low, voters lose the unique opportunity to impact issues that matter to them most, and our elected officials lose the authority to claim a mandate for their policy agenda.

Municipalities across Ontario recognize this challenge and have made changes to make voting convenient overall. They're offering accessible voting locations, more days to vote, online and phone options for voting, and voter assistance, for example. Despite these efforts, voter turnout at the municipal level has declined. It's critical to consider the other factors that can motivate voters to turnout and cast a ballot.

To motivate people to vote, we must start with understanding people's backgrounds and experiences. How do we normalize voting? What are their personal, family, and cultural beliefs around voting? What has their experience been with politics and the electoral process? How do we create policies and programs that *pull* voters to participate in an election, for example, by addressing their sense of civic duty or their trust in the system. Just as important – how to take note of all the ways campaigns and candidates *push* voters to vote, by putting forward compelling and representative candidates or by creating competitive races.

We know that convenience alone is not enough. That means taking a critical look at the gaps in voter knowledge and addressing them through voter education and awareness campaigns, so they feel confident when they cast their ballot.

The challenges to voter turnout have been well documented: fewer people are running for office; the local media environment is shrinking; politics have become increasingly toxic; there's a lack of understanding of the role of local media; councils are largely not representative of their communities; and people don't believe their vote will make a difference.

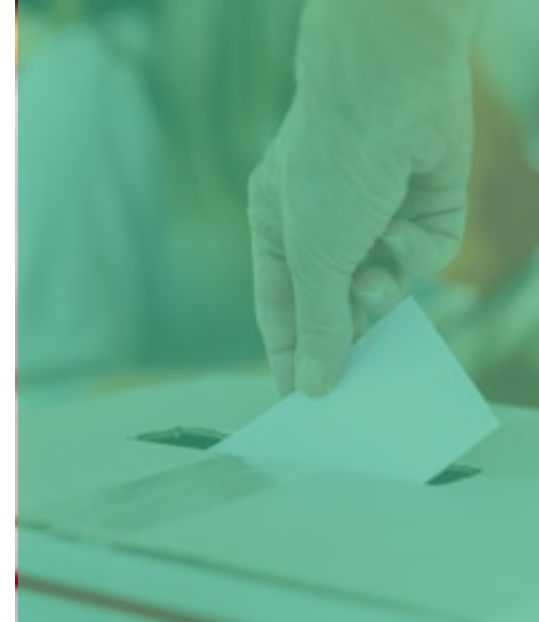
These realities and issues lead us to several conclusions:

- There is no silver bullet, no single solution to increase voter turnout.
- The scope and complexity of the challenges will require a sector-wide response to address the issues impacting voter turnout.
- The loss of local media has far-reaching impacts on civic participation and voter turnout.
- Making voting easier and more accessible, while important, has not been the answer to improving voter turnout.
- We need to focus on motivating voters if we're going to turn the tables on low turnout.

AMO is not putting forward a single recommended path forward as each community's needs and assets are different. Instead, the sector's best path to success will rely on a combination of efforts, including civic education, multi-partner awareness campaigns, support for local media and candidate support initiatives.

And while there are significant challenges to deal with, there are also countless reasons for hope and optimism—communities across Ontario, academic institutions, public sector associations, and civil societies are increasingly devoting time and resources to addressing these challenges.

The strategies withing this *Turn Up the Turnout* resource can help your community create its own pathway towards a renewed, positive civic engagement, increased voter turnout, and an overall healthier democracy.





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:

- What are the personal, family, and cultural beliefs that impact how they think about the electoral process?
- What experiences have they had with campaigns, candidates, and politics?

Empathy includes both understanding the reasons that pull voters to participate in an election – like their sense of civic duty or trust in the system – and understanding the ways campaigns and candidates push people to vote – like compelling candidates or competitive races.

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.

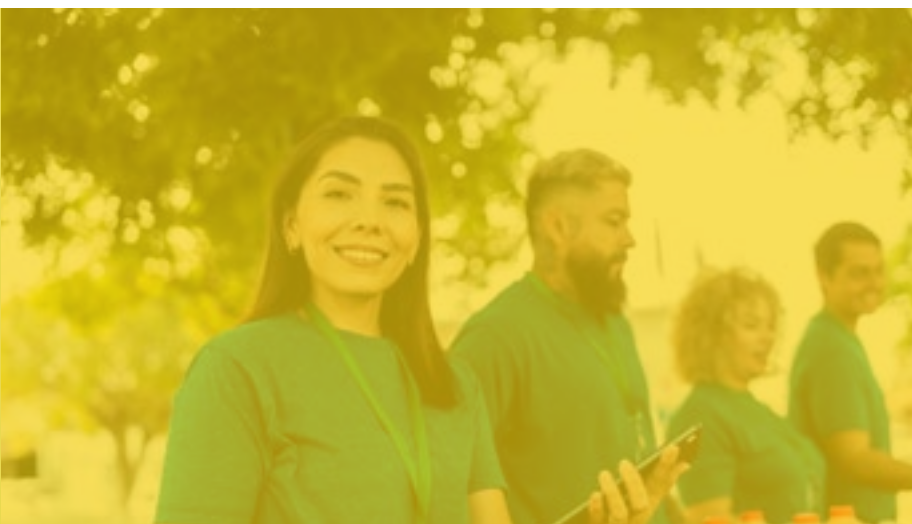
Strengthening Beliefs, Trust, and Norms

Voting is a bridge between the personal and the political. When people vote, they bring their perspectives, beliefs, and norms into the political conversation. In other words, their choice to vote, and who to vote for, is influenced by their personal beliefs, and those beliefs impact a voter's decision to participate in an election. Some of the personal beliefs include:

- 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

While these motivations are often personal and pre-existing, people can be influenced through strategic interventions, for example:

- Civic education programs
- Community-based initiatives
- Policies encouraging civic engagement



Civic Education Programs for Youth

Research shows those who vote as soon as they're eligible are more likely to vote throughout their lives. Offering civic education programs in schools, universities, and colleges that teach young people how to vote, understand the issues, spot reliable news, and see the value of their vote can foster lifelong civic participation and have a meaningful impact on a young person's sense of civic duty and interest in politics.

Civic education can also happen on social media, with help from influencers and artists, who already have roles as leaders and can more effectively shape community norms around political participation.

EXAMPLE SOLUTION:

Municipal Rep Day is a pilot program by AMO and CIVIX that provides resources to help elementary and secondary school students connect with locally elected officials and level up their awareness and appreciation for local government. Learn more [here](#).

Community-Based Initiatives

Community-based initiatives can build a culture of participation for the public. These efforts include supporting diverse local media, empowering groups that represent marginalized communities, and making government easier to access so people feel involved in policy decisions rather than just affected by them.

EXAMPLE SOLUTION:

RISE is a 15-week program by Apathy is Boring that helps young people co-create community projects and contribute to strengthening our civic and democratic fabric by engaging on topics that interest them. Young people are provided skills, tools, knowledge, and resources to create change in their communities. Learn more [here](#).

Efforts Encouraging Civic Engagement

Initiatives that encourage participation in decision-making between elections are an important way to ensure people are comfortable with and have trust in local government and feel ready and excited to vote come election time. These initiatives spur public engagement and can include things like a participatory budgeting process, "coffee with a councillor" programs, and youth and/or community-based councils.

EXAMPLE SOLUTION:

The Town of Innisfil created an Electoral Engagement Advisory Committee (EEAC) that reviews how the Town engages residents in municipal elections and makes recommendations for ways to encourage voter and candidate participation. Learn more [here](#).

Strengthening Campaigns and Supporting Candidates

Political candidates, campaigns, and contexts can shape how a person responds to politics on a race-by-race basis. While municipalities and non-partisan community-based organizations don't have a direct role in recruiting candidates or running campaigns, their policies, programs and events can directly impact who runs and how campaigns are conducted. Some of the factors that can pique a voter's interest in an election include:

- The competitiveness of an election
- The appeal of a candidate
- The personal relevancy of issues
- Trust in the election rules and process

To boost a voter's motivation, some approaches include:

- Candidate forums and debates
- Increasing the number of candidates running and seeking re-election
- Providing candidate support to people from marginalized groups
- Improving voter access to candidates' experience and policies

Candidate Forums and Debates:

Candidate forums and debates are spaces for people to hear from candidates and ask them questions. These forums increase voters' understanding of complex issues and policies, while also connecting the community to the electoral process. Community-based organizations and municipalities can facilitate and promote engaging forums.



Increasing the Number of Candidates Running and Seeking Re-Election:

In municipal elections, it is up to the candidate and their team to identify their voters, connect with them, and encourage voter turnout. At the provincial and federal level, candidates have political parties help with this work. Fewer candidates in a municipal election means fewer campaign teams reaching voters. Acclamations, in particular full council acclamations, mean that important discussions about community priorities just aren't happening.

It's important to understand the trends and the two connected data points that pose their own challenges to the health of democracies and voter turnout specifically: the decreasing number of candidates running and a related increase in the number of acclamations.

	2010	2014	2018	2022
Position acclamations		390	477	553
Full council acclamations	30	18	26	32
Candidates	8,039	7,290	6,658	6,325

Increasing the number of candidates can have a direct impact on voter turnout, as more candidates results in greater diversity of opinion and more competitive races. This allows voters who otherwise feel unrepresented to have a candidate they can support. In addition, more candidates can mean more people going door-to-door and campaigning to mobilize voters.

In the short term, ways to increase the number of candidates running can include:

- Hosting information sessions for potential candidates,
- Providing mentoring opportunities to learn from experienced campaigners, and,
- Running public awareness and education campaigns.



AMO will be running a campaign in 2026 to help increase the number of people running or seeking re-election and to help increase voter turnout.

In the longer-terms ways to reduce acclamations include:

- Lowering the barriers to candidacy for municipalities that regularly experience acclamations
- Providing more opportunities for prospective candidates to work with municipal officials on understanding the electoral process,
- Addressing rising incivility and harassment online and in-person, and
- Forging closer bonds between elected officials and their constituents to identify possible candidates.



EXAMPLE SOLUTION:

Many municipalities work to recruit community members to join local agencies, boards, and commissions. These opportunities, which are primarily volunteer roles, help potential candidates to increase their understanding of local issues and how their local governments function. This helps develop confidence and experience in how municipal government works.

Municipalities can encourage applicants for these opportunities, such as serving on library boards, municipal accessibility committees, supporting local non-profit organizations, and running to serve as a school board trustee. Municipalities may also encourage people to support a candidate by helping knock on doors, fundraise, put up signs or help with childcare. By doing this, people will develop a better understanding of what it takes to run.

EXAMPLE SOLUTION:

Stand for Council by the Municipal Association of Victoria in Australia is an initiative to host information sessions for community and prospective candidates to prepare them for election campaigns and the work of becoming a local government representative. Learn more [here](#).

EXAMPLE SOLUTION:

Many organizations offer support to local candidates, such as Nominee, Politics NOW, electHER Now, and the Jean Collective. More resources can be found in [Appendix A](#).

Providing Candidate Support to People From Marginalized Groups:

By providing direct support to candidates from marginalized communities, stakeholders like identity-based national organizations, local campaign schools, and municipalities can encourage people to run for office who might have never done so otherwise.

Candidate Support and Recruitment Organizations:

These organizations encourage more people to run for office and reduce acclamations by increasing the number of candidates. These organizations differ, but typically offer a combination of training, resources, communities of support, and mentorship opportunities. They are also often focused on encouraging leaders from marginalized communities to run for office. There are different types of candidate support and attraction organizations, including:

- Local campaign schools: These groups provide resources, training, and local connections and support for candidates. They are typically volunteer-run and work with limited budgets. They have been quite successful in encouraging more people to run and get elected. Some of these schools can be temporary, with programming hosted before municipal elections, while others stay in operation continually. An example of a temporary program is the collaboration between the City of Hamilton and the Hamilton YWCA who have coordinated candidate support opportunities in the past and will do so again in 2026.
- National identity-based organizations: These groups support candidates across the country, often with a focus on a specific community. Groups like The Canadian Muslim Vote, Proud Politics, and Operation Black Vote Canada provide resources and training support for candidates across the country.

EXAMPLE SOLUTION:

Many organizations offer support to local candidates, such as Operation Black Vote Canada, The Canadian-Muslim Vote, Proud Politics, and Equal Voice. A full list can be found in [Appendix A](#).

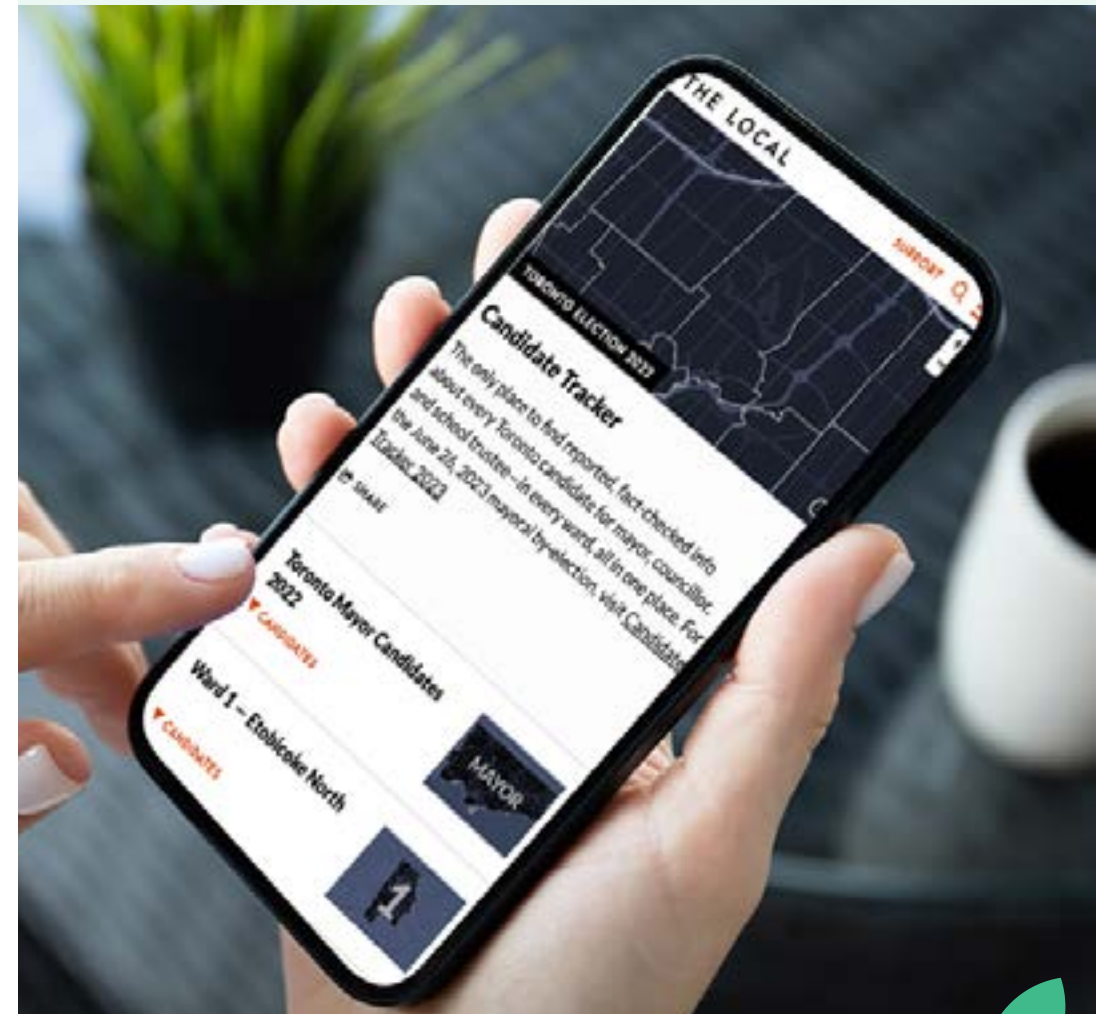


Enhancing Voter Access to Candidates' Experience and Policies:

Providing voters with information about candidates deepens their understanding of their electoral options, informs them about what a candidate will do if elected, and mitigates personal biases and assumed ballot cues. Some municipalities offer standardized, non-partisan "candidate guides" - compilations of candidate photos, brief platforms, biographies, and ways to contact candidates. Nonpartisan organizations like libraries and other civic organizations are also well-positioned to provide voters with trusted sources of information about local candidates.

EXAMPLE SOLUTION:

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?

Reducing barriers to voting is important because it ensures that voting is as convenient as possible for all voters.

Across Ontario, many municipalities have already done great work to reduce barriers to voting. This includes providing a variety of options for how to vote and adding additional advanced voting options.

While there is still progress to be made in terms of structural barriers, it's equally important to turn our attention to another challenge: ensuring that people actually know how to vote, including the policies, procedures, and programs designed to help them vote. These educational barriers are significant. Addressing them is a critical step in making participation accessible to everyone.



Structural Barriers

Fixing structural barriers to voting requires the participation of election administrators, municipalities, community groups, outside organizations, and sometimes coordination with the provincial government.

Structural barriers can be addressed by making voting easier and more enjoyable for voters.

These solutions can require significant investment, including staffing, technology acquisition, and facility costs and are challenging for smaller municipalities with fewer financial and human resources.

When voting is easier, faster, and more convenient, this can positively impact voter turnout. Elections management bodies (EMBs) and municipalities have been working to change policies and procedures to make voting more convenient, sometimes requiring provincial approval or changes in the Municipal Elections Act. Some solutions include:

- Advance voting days
- Different voting methods
- Poll locations
- Reassuring voters
- Targeted accessibility measures for minority communities

Advance voting days provide voters with additional days to cast a ballot before Election Day. While advance voting days are associated with increased voter turnout, this is generally among older voters and those already interested in politics.

Different voting methods provide voters with an “alternative” way to cast a ballot. These include internet voting (IV), vote by mail (VBM), and telephone voting (TeleVote). Municipalities across Ontario have shifted to different voting methods. During the 2022 municipal election, only 24% of municipalities offered only a paper ballot. There are some who have concerns about electoral integrity or how to use new and unfamiliar technologies.



Poll locations are the physical spaces where an election is held. Voter turnout decreases as the distance to a polling place increases. Some municipalities across Canada are addressing this by adopting “non-static” Election Day polls. These include “floating polls” (which may be mobile or change locations), “vote anywhere polls” (which allow any voter in a municipality or district to cast their ballot there), or “election day vote centres” (which centralize polls for multiple districts).

Reassuring voters has taken on new importance with the rise of anti-democratic actors around the world. Ensuring the voting process is as easy, convenient, and transparent as possible may counter some of these efforts to undermine trust in election integrity. Election administrators can take proactive steps to explain the voting process and measures that are taken to ensure the integrity of the vote.

Targeted accessibility measures for minority communities mean providing specific attention to groups that may have physical, spatial, or linguistic barriers to participation. People living with disabilities may need more assistance accessing information about an election, getting to a polling place, and casting a ballot. Students living away from home may need information on their rights as tenants and residents of a municipality, and documentation required to vote. Linguistic minorities may need translation services or multilingual election information.

Educational Barriers

Lack of familiarity with the voting process can be a barrier to participation. This is particularly a challenge for first-time and infrequent voters who may assume that voting is more difficult than it actually is.

All voters need information about where, when, and ways to vote. The rules and procedures of municipal elections are different from provincial and federal elections, and this can lead to confusion for all voters. 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.

EXAMPLE SOLUTION:

➤ 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](#).

EXAMPLE SOLUTION:

➤ 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](#).



AMO Resources

In the coming months, AMO will be providing resources and support for those considering running, or running again, for office. They will examine several of the items below and help build a deeper understanding about what to expect as an election unfolds and help participants understand their own motivations for running.

Political Campaigns

Candidates and campaigns help voters decide who to vote for. In particular, candidates aim to gain voter trust by informing voters about their campaign, the issues, and how to vote. This often can have an impact on voter turnout. Their efforts can be grouped into:

Direct candidate-to-voter outreach is the contact between a candidate or campaign representative and a potential voter. This includes door-to-door canvassing, telephone outreach, “mainstreeting” (handing out flyers and/or visiting local businesses on a “main street”), and direct social media contact. Phone contact and door-to-door canvassing have a proven impact on increasing voter turnout.

Indirect candidate-to-voter outreach includes direct mail, advertising on traditional or social media, and campaign signs. Indirect outreach has been associated with increased voter turnout. For example, campaign mail and advertising can remind voters of an election, while campaign signs signal support in a low-barrier, high-visibility way.

Non-Partisan Campaigns

Political candidates and campaigns aren’t the only stakeholders to address voter turnout. There are many groups that care about closing knowledge gaps for voters. These groups have a critical role in nonpartisan education about where, when, and ways to vote. In addition, they can provide independent information to support voters in understanding the options around who to vote for. Stakeholders that play a significant role in this work include:

- Elections Administrators
- Non-Partisan Community Groups
- Advocacy Organizations
- Local Media



Election Administrators & Non-Partisan Community Groups support voters with the mechanics of voting by creating how-to guides for voters, launching digital and grassroots non-partisan information campaigns, and providing training and resources for community leaders to empower their communities to vote. Ultimately, these efforts increase voter knowledge of the process and confidence in their ability to vote.

Advocacy Organizations can raise awareness about issues important to them and share information about candidates and their perspectives and positions on those issues. Especially in municipal politics, where there aren't formal party affiliations, voters who have strong opinions about specific issues can turn to advocacy groups to get a sense of which candidates align with their values.

Local Media can provide overviews of candidates in a race, including comparisons of platforms, in-depth interviews with candidates, how to find candidate websites and social media accounts, and more. Increased knowledge of a campaign's platform and a stronger sense of being informed are strongly and positively associated with a voter's likelihood of turning up to vote.

EXAMPLE SOLUTION:

The Grey Highlands Municipal League created a candidate menu to provide a quick and easy way for voters to look at their candidates. These mailers were sent to every house in a rural municipality in 2022. Learn more [here](#).

EXAMPLE SOLUTION:

Organizer Diana Chan McNally put together a one-page guide for unhoused people and homeless service providers on accessing voting in the 2025 federal election. Learn more [here](#).

EXAMPLE SOLUTION:

Ink-Stained Wretches is a grassroots advocacy group dedicated to building a culture of appreciation for quality journalism in aid of democracy. Learn more [here](#).



Next Steps

Increasing voter turnout requires a coordinated, multi-faceted approach that inspires voters and addresses barriers to voting. Success depends on strategic collaboration among diverse stakeholders, each leveraging their unique capabilities and resources to strengthen democratic participation.

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.

Resources from the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, including research into the barriers to running for office, the Democratic Engagement Solutions Bank, and civic education resources, can be employed to initiate or advocate for specific solutions or to understand the overall health of a local democracy.

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. You aren't alone. Take the next step.



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Appendix

Candidate Attraction and Support Organizations

Please let us know if you are aware of other candidate attraction and support organizations that support Ontario municipal candidates we should include in our list.

Organization	Link
electHER NOW	electhernow.ca
Equal Voice	equalvoice.ca
Grey Highlands Municipal League	ourleague.ca
Guelph Campaign School	municipalcampaignschool.ca/guelph
Leadership féminin Prescott-Russell	leadershipfemininpr.ca/politique_feminin
Nominee	gonominee.com/course/campaign-101
Operation Black Vote Canada	obvc.ca
Oxford Campaign School	municipalcampaignschool.ca/oxford
PoliticsNOW	polinow.org
ProudPolitics	proudpolitics.org
The Canadian-Muslim Vote	canadianmuslimvote.ca
The Jean Collective	thejeancollective.ca
Waterloo Region Women's Campaign School	wrwomenrun.wordpress.com
Wellington Campaign School	municipalcampaignschool.ca/wellington



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Toll-free in Ontario:	1-877-4-AMO-LAS (1-877-426-6527)
E-mail:	ccbf@amo.on.ca
Twitter:	@CCBFinOntario
Instagram:	@CCBFinOntario
Linkedin:	The Canada Community-Building Fund in Ontario
Websites:	www.amo.on.ca
	www.buildingcommunities.ca
	www.infrastructure.gc.ca