

# Mapping the Experiences of Diverse Candidates Running for Municipal Office in Ontario

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## **Message from the AMO President**

In late 2022, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) Board of Directors approved its Healthy Democracy Project for a 4-year period and with more than \$1 million dollars in support funding.

The Healthy Democracy Project had grown from AMO's 2021-2022 pre-municipal election campaign, We All Win, to attract greater diversity in representation to municipal politics. The campaign was in recognition of the fact that Ontario's municipal councils are not representative of the diversity of the province and the populations municipal councils serve.

Additionally, several emerging trends led AMO's Board of Directors to support the development of AMO's Healthy Democracy Project:

1. Fewer people are voting and engaging in local democratic decision making.
2. Fewer people are running for municipal office and acclamations are on the rise.
3. As indicated, Ontario's municipal councils are not representative of the diverse populations they serve.
4. And AMO's members, Ontario's municipally elected officials, are increasingly dealing with hostile, unsafe work environments where political dialogue has become toxic and unproductive.

AMO understands these are complex and complicated issues. Addressing and reversing trends and systemic barriers will take time and is work that will not end, rather evolve. It is also work that requires effort from leaders and organizations apart from AMO.

But it needs to start somewhere. Building on the We All Win campaign, AMO assembled its [Healthy Democracy Project Advisory Group](#) to provide guidance and advice to support AMO in advancing the health of democracy in Ontario municipalities and with its members. The Advisory Group is composed of remarkable individuals including those with lived experience, academic and tactical expertise, and a shared commitment to advancing the health of democracy in Ontario municipalities.

To inform some of the initial priorities and deliverables of the HDP, and in lead up to the 2026 municipal elections, the Advisory Group and Board of Directors approved a one-of-its-kind research project. Contracting with Monumental Projects, AMO has undertaken research that delves into the experiences of those who have run or considered entering the local political arena, especially those from diverse, underrepresented communities who face the most barriers to political participation. The focus of the research is to gain insight into the challenges faced by diverse candidates and proposes a range of solutions AMO and our partners can consider as we work to build a healthier local democratic environment.

What emerges in this work is an outline of the often very difficult realities faced by those seeking to serve, and also a story of hope, resilience, and an urgent call to action.

With this knowledge and insight shining a light on these challenges, comes an informed optimism grounded in growing partnerships and allies. The proposed solutions help inform the path forward—a path many are already walking with many more ready to join.

The Monumental research team was given the direction to not limit their findings to what AMO can influence or accomplish. We need to understand the full landscape of issues encountered by people trying to participate in local democracy. As such there are recommendations and ideas that fall outside of AMO's purview and will require the support of other groups with a shared commitment for improving the health of local democracies.

We appreciate our partners at Monumental Projects for the care and expertise they brought to this work. And our sincerest gratitude for everyone who shared their stories and ideas with us. Know that we value and respect your knowledge, time, and hard-earned wisdom.

On behalf of AMO,

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Colin Best', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Colin Best  
AMO President

## **An Initiative of AMO's Healthy Democracy Project**

As the most diverse province in Canada, and one of the most diverse societies in the Western world, Ontario's present and future success is interconnected to our ability to engage the potential, brilliance and innovation of our residents. Currently, diverse representation in municipal leadership of Ontario's cities, towns, northern and rural communities lags behind the diversity of our population. This is the case whether you live in the eastern region, western region, northern region, central region, or right in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA).

From Summer 2023 to Spring 2024, Monumental Projects was retained by the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) to conduct the *Mapping the Experiences of Diverse Candidates Running for Municipal Office in Ontario* research project. This research is a part of AMO's larger [Healthy Democracy Project](#), first launched in 2022, and follows on AMO's *We All Win* campaign.

AMO's Board of Directors approved Healthy Democracy Project seeks to respond to several emerging trends in municipal politics including the fact that:

1. Fewer people are voting and engaging in local democratic decision making.
2. Fewer people are running for municipal office and acclamations are on the rise.
3. As indicated, Ontario's municipal councils are not representative of the diverse populations they serve.
4. And AMO's members, Ontario's municipally elected officials, are increasingly dealing with hostile, unsafe work environments where political dialogue has become toxic and unproductive.

In this context, the goals of the Healthy Democracy Project are to:

- Increase diversity on municipal councils to be more reflective of Ontario's diversity;
- Support AMO members through their diversity, equity, and inclusion journey;
- Ensure that elected officials are equity-informed leaders; and that
- People running for office don't feel alone and have recourse when they experience harassment and/or discrimination.

Building from the foundational need to produce more research informed by the lived experiences of diverse candidates running for municipal office in Ontario, the *Mapping* project led by Monumental asks and seeks to answer the following problem frame:

**How might AMO create recommendations that the association - and its partners - can implement to close the experience gap of diverse individuals running for municipal office across Ontario?**

### **Our Research Approach**

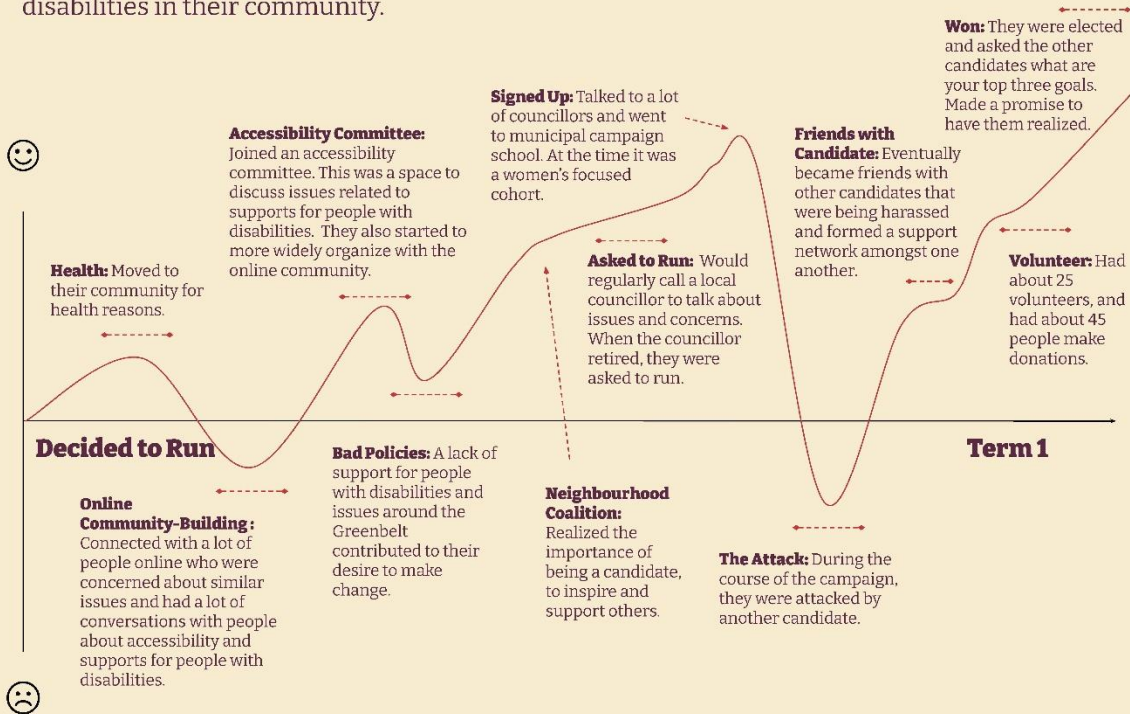
To explore these critical issues, we engaged with diverse individuals in Ontario who were: (1) deciding to run, (2) running for office, and/or (3) successful in obtaining political office.

For the purposes of this research, diverse candidates is defined as individuals belonging to equity-deserving groups, including but not limited to people who identify as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Persons of Colour), women, non-binary, transgender, 2SLGBTQ+, English as a second language, newcomers to Canada, lower income, neurodivergent, living with physical disabilities, and non-Christian religious or spiritual affiliations. The research process began with the development of a problem frame and was followed by the undertaking of desktop research. The purpose of the desktop research was to understand gaps in the literature and trends across the following five thematic areas: gender identity and expression; sexual orientation and representation; cultural diversity and racial inequity; diversely-abled communities; and economically marginalized communities and class difference.

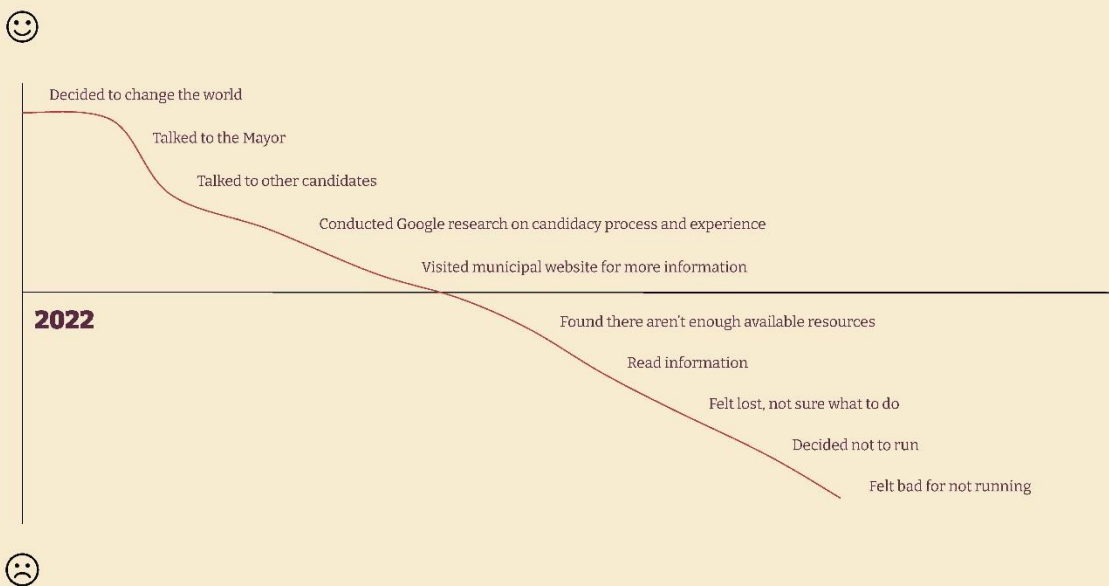
Based on our findings, most of the available research about diversity in municipal politics is almost exclusively focused on women -- an important area of study, but only one component of candidate diversity. While some work is being done to explore the impacts of being a racially or ethnically diverse candidate at the federal level or a candidate with disabilities, municipal research in the Ontario context is extremely sparse. Subsequently, our primary research focused on lesser studied identity groups and individuals with intersectional identities.

In addition to individuals with lived experiences, we also engaged with sector partners and community leaders. Through a mixed methods approach, we probed the emotional journey that candidates go through to enter office (“journey mapping”), exploring their motivations, assets, and barriers. The insights we gained through this primary data collection helped us craft a series of potential interventions that AMO and partners can prototype to advance the aims of the Healthy Democracy project.

This research participant was the first non-binary councillor to be elected in their ward, motivated to resolve the lack of accessibility and supports available to people living with disabilities in their community.



Not having enough information was a common reason for deciding not to run. This potential candidate - a mid-career professional identifying as male and Black in a mid-size jurisdiction - found that his lack of knowledge about (a) the requirements of a campaign, and (b) the role of councillor itself, was a significant barrier. He shared that not only was it frustrating not to easily find that information online, but that he wasn't sure who (or how) to ask these seemingly basic questions.



In total 118 participants were engaged through the primary research process through 9 in-depth interviews, 90 survey responses and 2 focus groups with 19 participants. Working with a small sample size was an intentional research design to facilitate the collection of rich data directly from people's lived experiences, it does however limit the generalizability of the findings.

## **What We Learned**

While Canada is becoming increasingly diverse as a nation, and while Canadian views on issues such as race, sexual identity, and immigration have become more inclusive over recent decades (with the exception of slight recent drops in support for immigration levels), running for political office has not necessarily become more accessible or inclusive at the same rate. The realities faced by diverse candidates brings home a disturbing reality: the fact that it's not certain that over time it is becoming easier for diverse candidates to thrive in municipal politics in Ontario.

Potential candidates we spoke to conduct a mental calculus of the risk-to-reward trade-offs of entering political life before deciding to run ("the risk-reward paradox"). In this calculus, they determine if the possible rewards to running for office outweigh the personal risks. Our findings suggest a possibly negative trend, with diverse candidates increasingly perceiving more risks than rewards within political life. As such, diversifying municipal elected office in Ontario cannot be assumed to simply happen on its own over time, but will require concentrated efforts by those passionate about having a more representative democracy.

To create solutions that help us overcome these challenges, we first need to understand the Common Motivations, Common Enablers and Assets, and Common Barriers faced by diverse candidates running for office.

## **Common Motivations**

Through the *Mapping* project, research participants shared a variety of motivations, including identity-based motivations such as a desire to increase representation in their local governments, a familial or childhood engagement with politics, and a desire to change the status quo for their communities. We also encountered policy motivations, such as a desire to change local legislation in support of community needs, as well as place-based motivations connected to the proximity of municipal politics to observable impacts for residents.



Identity-based motivations	
Increasing representation of diverse communities in government	<i>A resounding desire amongst participants to see “more people who look like me” in positions of government and authority across the political landscape in Ontario. An opportunity to elevate voices from their community, advocating for their communities’ needs, and changing the civic culture to be more welcoming and fair. Demonstrating that good leadership doesn’t necessarily mean White leadership.</i>
Family history of political leadership & childhood factors	<i>Creates a sense of familiarity and belonging within the political realm, as a result of attending commitment meetings or events. Early childhood memories sparked an interest in pursuing government, political and social change careers as a result of lived experiences, such as immigrating to Canada as a child with English as a second language.</i>
Demonstrating better leadership / disappointment with the status quo	<i>An opportunity to demonstrate a better type of leadership that is more connected, action-oriented and follows through, as opposed to one where campaign promises aren’t kept and municipal staff are unaccountable to local residents especially when they aren’t from the communities they serve.</i>

Policy motivations	
Making a difference for diverse communities through policy change	<i>By creating policies that contribute to systems change and improve current conditions for constituents, this includes topics related to urban planning, accessibility, climate change and anti-racism to shape how municipal resources are implemented.</i>

Place-based motivations	
Municipal politics is close to home	<i>And as a result, it is a place to create almost immediate impact for local communities. Evolving from values-based community engagement, decisions to run were sometimes in reaction to a suggestion from an individual or a natural evolution of their community involvement or volunteerism.</i>
Online communities within municipalities	<i>Have served as a platform for citizens to discuss municipal issues, explore interventions together and offer social support when candidates launch their campaigns. They are also important for overcoming accessibility barriers by creating</i>

	<i>forums for discourse when in-person events are hard to access and/or individuals have mobility constraints.</i>
Rural & Northern Ontario	<i>Strong motivations are needed to overcome unique challenges, such as physical and social infrastructure in rural, remote and Northern communities, in addition to limited opportunities for mentorship, volunteer recruitment, campaign fundraising and financing.</i>

**Common Enablers and Assets**

A number of different assets emerged from our research including the benefits of being rooted in community, identity-based or professional groups, having advocates and mentors with existing ties to the political system, the importance of financing and previous roles that served as a proof of concept of an ability to lead. Support from families, friends and community, and the critical importance of timing was also cited.

Personal skills and abilities	<i>Being a people person, a strong communicator, relationship-oriented, extroverted, a bridge builder and an articulate public speaker. As well as, having nuanced cultural, philosophical and lived experiences.</i>
Rooted in strong community, identity and/or professional groups	<i>Has assisted diverse candidates in building community recognition and a support base for campaigns, particularly in tight-knit communities. Bases may be grounded in community organizing, local businesses and unions, places of worship, online communities, existing relationships in the non-profit sector which provide volunteers, voting and emotional support.</i>
Advocates, mentors and cheerleaders within the system	<i>Provides confidence, access and the platform needed to step into a campaign. In its absence, diverse candidates feel overwhelmed and demoralized, not knowing who to even ask basic questions to. Some have received support from current diverse councillors, which can result in more tangible supports such as access to voter lists, other tactical resources and a deeper understanding of how the system works first hand. Others have participated in formalized capacity building programs, such as youth civic engagement organizations or campaign schools, including those for specific-identity based groups.</i>
Family, friends & community support	<i>Campaigning is often a family affair, with children, partners, parents, aunties and cousins all playing a role to help candidates manage busy schedules on top of family responsibilities and full time jobs. Candidates also draw on a</i>

	<i>core team of long-standing friendships throughout the process of campaigning, assembling groups of volunteers who help build campaign websites, outreach materials, go door-to-door and support childcare. However, campaign firms can be invaluable assets to your campaign success, if you can afford it.</i>
<i>Right place, right time (internal/external)</i>	<i>Is a delicate balance and calculus that potential candidates explore between knowing when they are personally ready and getting an understanding if their community is ready to receive them as a candidate of their specific background and identity.</i>
<i>Proof of concept</i>	<i>A candidate is more likely to run a successful campaign if they have already demonstrated their aptitude for the job and their ability to get things done ahead of running a campaign.</i>
<i>Personal financing</i>	<i>Campaigns can be costly. In the absence of support from a political party or donors, diverse candidates may fund their campaign entirely through personal finances, which is only possible at a certain threshold of financial stability and income level.</i>

**Common Barriers**

General barriers identified by research participants included financial barriers, lack of access to social capital and bad timing (family conflicts, career conflicts, running against an incumbent). Other barriers that were particularly salient for diverse candidates included the mental health toll of discrimination, bullying, and harassment, and specific accessibility barriers faced by those with mobility issues and/or neurodivergence.

<i>Timing</i>	<p><i>Is a critical factor, and the incumbent advantage is tremendous. Candidates noted that their initial success came from running after an incumbent stepped down or when they ran in ridings where two councillors could serve in an area, allowing for more open competition for a second seat.</i></p> <p><i>Other commonly cited barriers included retaliation from an incumbent, the difficulty of raising funds when running against one, and the timing of a campaign in relation to other family and career commitments. Running a campaign and assuming a governance role is often done in addition to existing full-time responsibilities, such as maintaining relationships, parenting, and caretaking elder family members. This disproportionately affects women, for example, who feel like they have to make a</i></p>
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	<i>choice between their careers and families.</i>
<b>Financial barriers</b>	<i>Are by far the most widely cited barrier for candidates. The item list of costs to campaign included: designing a website, designing and printing handouts, campaign signs, child care, food for volunteers, t-shirts and other team merchandise, surrendered income from not working, hiring staff (e.g., campaign managers), and hiring a campaign firm. Identity could also compound these issues for diverse candidates (e.g., poverty, single parents, and income disparities on average between non-racialized, racialized and Indigenous graduates). Research reports also find that donation levels from racialized communities tend to be lower on average than non-racialized communities.</i>
<b>Access to social capital: donours, volunteers, mentors, exemplars &amp; training</b>	<i>Social capital barriers for diverse candidates can take on many forms. This includes an ability to recruit volunteers and accessing mentors and role models. These relationships are critical to help candidates (1) locate enough resources and information to prepare without access to gatekeepers and insiders, (2) navigate the campaign trail in an environment where there are few if any success cases and exemplars from your identity group (e.g., of transgender women in power), and (3) navigate the day-to-day realities of government with few mentors and allies that share their background, often being tokenized.</i>
<b>The mental health toll of discrimination, building and harassment</b>	<i>Political polarization and toxic discourse have become increasingly salient issues in Ontario and disproportionately impact diverse candidates. Some feel like the stakes are so much higher in the digital era because of the negative impact of alt-right and White supremacist movements online. Candidates shared harrowing stories, including online trolls digging into the personal history to make attacks that referenced deceased family members, or spreading false and misleading stories about their position and personal lives, and people defacing their signs.</i>  <i>Once in office, many participants described feelings of loneliness and exceptionalism for being the only member of municipal government from their identity group (e.g., the only racialized member of council, the first non-White major, the first non-binary councillor, etc.). Being the only, they felt a pressure to represent the voices of an entire diaspora, gender, sexual orientation and/or religion. It's a heavy burden to carry.</i>
<b>Accessibility</b>	<i>Candidates with physical disabilities have lessened capacity for physically-intensive campaign activities (e.g., door-to-door canvassing among others). Neurodivergent candidates also face</i>

*barriers with community members often misinterpreting non-traditional communication styles and personal presentation for a lack of charisma or capability.*

## Prototype Ideas

Research participants suggested possible interventions (in this report, we use the language of “prototypes”) to improve the experiences of diverse candidates running for municipal office in Ontario. These prototypes, to be implemented by AMO and its partners, have been grouped into the three categories that follow (Ways to Better Support Diverse Candidates, Shifting the Mainstream Cultural & Environmental Context, and Systemic Changes & Advocacy Stances).

## Ways to Support Diverse Candidates

These prototypes address the ways in which diverse candidates can be better supported through their municipal politics journey in areas such as capacity building, enhanced social/financial capital supporting safety and wellness.

A. Training and Capacity Building	
1. Targeted trainings & continued improvement of campaign schools	<i>To teach diverse candidates how to run a successful campaign, how to successfully facilitate community dialogues and how to lead effective policy change once in office, for example, in the years prior to an election</i>
2. Broad accessible information sessions in communities	<i>To reach diverse candidates where they are, including by hosting sessions in high traffic community spaces and virtually and through targeting marketing and communications campaigns</i>
3. Encouraging communications that speak directly to diverse residents	<i>Using compelling visuals, storytelling and messaging that expresses they are needed, wanted, and that their uniqueness is necessary to improve the functioning of our municipal governments</i>
4. Easy to access and visually appealing resources	<i>Such as a how-to-guide that outlines the step-by-step process of becoming a candidate, running a campaign and being in office using high quality multimedia materials</i>
5. Communication support to tighten	<i>To support diverse candidates with the creation of clear, concise and related campaign messaging through training,</i>

candidates' messaging	<i>feedback and hands-on support to elevate the quality of their communications materials</i>
6. Youth engagement & grade school education	<i>To support diverse students considering a career in municipal government and related fields through guidance counsellors, speakers, including past and present candidates, and internships</i>

**B. Getting Things Done: Community Connection, Social & Financial Capital**

7. Mentorship	<i>To provide much needed encouragement, tips and tricks on how to navigate the campaign trail, as well as boost the reach of diverse candidates' campaigns as co-sponsors and support them through acclamation</i>
8. Community connections	<i>To form partnerships to collaborate on campaign tasks, share resources and knowledge, and connect candidates to community organizations, professional networks and labour unions that can amplify their reach and voter base</i>
9. Matching to donours	<i>Through targeted support to specific candidates, matchmaking events and/or developing libraries and contact lists to facilitate conversations and relationship building</i>
10. Facilitation through the process	<i>To support diverse candidates with an array of administrative tasks, such as completing registration paperwork which can feel burdensome and discouraging</i>

**C. Being Okay: Improving Personal Safety & Mental Wellness**

11. Peer support groups to overcome isolation & loneliness	<i>Fostering belonging through the creation of safe spaces to talk about difficult experiences, build energy and strength to continue through their political careers and share resources to cope with mental health</i>
12. Safety "survival kit"	<i>Partner and ally with diverse candidates, particularly racialized, women and transgender candidates, experiencing discrimination and harassment by advocating for anti-discrimination and in-person supports for activities such as canvassing</i>
13. Hotline for	<i>To offer diverse candidates access to trained mental health</i>

reporting harassment or abuse during campaigns	<i>professionals for those in distress, and provide a reporting mechanism to increase transparency and accountability about cases of harassment</i>
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**Shifting the Mainstream Culture & Environmental Context**

These prototypes tackle the need for larger cultural shifts within Ontario municipalities and politics in order to be more welcoming to diverse candidates. We recognize that these issues are much bigger than what AMO can and should be addressing. AMO looks to community and organizational leaders to aid in this work. We also recognize that all orders of government have a role to play.

14. Anti-discrimination campaigns & community education	<i>To counter mainstream cultural biases in Ontario through online sessions, in-person events and communication campaigns</i>
15. Humans of the Horseshoe	<i>Campaign to compassionately and enthusiastically amplify the stories and experiences of diverse candidates, groups and neighbourhoods</i>

**Systemic Changes & Advocacy Stances**

These prototypes explore more systemic changes within Ontario municipal politics that AMO can take on as advocacy stances.

16. Campaign finance	<i>To establish a maximum cap for total campaign donations that can be received both financial and in-kind</i>
17. Explore electoral reforms such as ranked balloting, term limits, lowered voting ages or shared tenure	<i>By learning from other jurisdictions that have used electoral reform to remove barriers for new and diverse candidates entering the system</i>
18. Anti-harassment code of conduct	<i>To enforce good behaviour and limited harassment of diverse candidates, including through reporting and disqualification from campaigns for bad behaviour</i>

19. Accessibility	<i>By providing opportunities for meaningful opportunities for participation, flexibility with scheduling activities and outreach, with a particular focus on people living with disabilities and residents whose schedules do not allow for participation in civic life</i>
20. Improving the conditions of the job	<i>By advocating for improved compensation models for municipal representatives, flexible working arrangements for folks living with disabilities and rules of engagement that limit unnecessary public exposure for governing representatives</i>

While our study encountered a number of very real barriers that exist to increasing the diversity of Candidates in municipal office in Ontario, it's also clear that diverse communities have many assets and allies willing to support their journeys into office. We believe this report is one of many interventions currently underway that can help stem the tide against toxicity, disengagement and polarization, and support the creation of municipal governance systems that more fully reflects Ontario's diverse tapestry of human experiences.