



Healthy Democracy Forum

Report back to 2024 participants

October 19-20, 2024 | Toronto, Ontario



Healthy Democracy Forum 2024:

The Association of Municipalities of Ontario's (AMO) inaugural Healthy Democracy Forum brought together more than 150 representatives from across Ontario who believe in the power of democracy, and the importance of diversity in municipal governance.

AMO's Healthy Democracy Project is a four-year, \$1 million investment to help renew local democracy. Building on its earlier *We All Win Campaign*, in 2022, the AMO Board of Directors committed to a course of action focused on a number of critical elements that form a foundation for a healthy and AMO, believes, sustainable local democracy:

- 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.

The 2024 Forum focused on attracting and supporting greater diversity in municipal governance. This two-day event was made possible through the support of the AMO Board of Directors and was facilitated through partnerships with Toronto Metropolitan University's Democracy Engagement Exchange and Apathy is Boring, a leading national organization focused on engaging youth in their communities.

Over two days, participants had the opportunity to listen, learn and network together through an engaging and hands-on agenda that included:

- An introduction to AMO's groundbreaking research – ***Mapping the Experiences of Diverse Candidates Running for Municipal Office in Ontario***, conducted by Monumental Research
- An inspiring day-long youth engagement session where students with an interest in local government brought forth ideas and insight into improving how young people are engaged in the democratic process and local decision making.
- A panel discussion centred around support for candidates and elected officials, and presentations that showcased organizations doing this important work
- Workshops to gather participant ideas and feedback on topics like Ontario's candidate support ecosystem, who support candidates to run for office and their vision for healthy democracy in their community
- AMO's unveiling of two new initiatives: the [Democratic Engagement Solutions](#) Bank and AMO's Local Democracy Accelerator, a pilot program working with a small number of communities to experiment with local solutions for a healthier democracy

Together in one room, municipal leaders, staff and associations, community leaders, researchers, academics, campaign organizations and others engaged in important dialogue about the current state of local democracy, the impact of bullying and harassment on elected officials, overall civil disengagement, and the challenges of leading and engaging locally.



2
days



154
participants



35
youth



21
speakers



4
workshops



3
youth focus
groups



2
panel
discussions

25 municipally
elected officials

82 organizations
represented

28 municipal staff

31 municipal
organizations

2024 Speakers

Moderated by Stewart McDonough, AMO Municipal Engagement Advisory and HDP Lead

Introductions:

Robin Jones – AMO President

Jasvinder Sandhu – Chair, Healthy Democracy Project Advisory Group; Former Councillor, Town of Oakville; Founder and Principal, SLPC Law; children's author

Natasha Salonen, Mayor, Wilmot Township

Petra Wolfbeiss – Director, Membership Services, AMO

The Honourable **Bernadette Clement**

Researchers:

Kofi Hope – Co-Founder, Monumental Projects

Chris Erl, Researcher, Toronto Metropolitan University's Democracy Engagement Exchange

Michael McGregor, Associate Professor, Toronto Metropolitan University

Panelists:

Amanda Kingsley Malo – Founder, PoliticsNOW

Jordan Simmons, Co-Founder, Nominee

Colleen James – Councillors, Region of Waterloo; Founder and Principal Consultant, Divonify

Dave Meslin – Bestselling Author of *Teardown: Rebuilding Democracy from the Ground Up*; Grey Highlands Municipal League

Nadia Dubyk – Councillor, Municipality of Grey Highlands

Daniela Giulietti, Director of Public Affairs, YWCA Hamilton Communications

Tammy Hwang, Councillor, City of Hamilton

Presenters:

Melissa Durrell – Founder, Waterloo Campaign School; former Councillor, City of Waterloo; CEO and Chief Strategist of Durrell Communications

Jerry Koh, Principal Consultant, Nice Futures; former Director of Systemic Innovation and MaRS Solutions Lab

Stewart McDonough – Healthy Democracy Project Lead, AMO

Closing Reflections:

Chi Nguyen – Executive Director, Equal Voice

Henry Khamonde, Healthy Democracy Project Intern

Rawlson King – Councillor, City of Ottawa



Mapping the Experiences of Diverse Candidates Running for Municipal Office in Ontario: What the Research Tells Us

In 2023, AMO commissioned a report through **Monumental 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 AMO believed, may face the most barriers to political participation. As Ontario and Canada changes, AMO believes it is important to understand how we modernize our processes for a sustainable democratic foundation in our local communities. The focus of the research was to gain insight into the challenges faced by diverse candidates and propose a range of solutions AMO and partners could consider as we work to build a healthier local democratic environment. The results of the report were shared at the Forum.

This research is the first of its kind; not only in Ontario, but across Canada. Researchers took a qualitative approach to developing the report, taking a deep dive into the lived experiences of their interviewees. Here's what they learned:

It's not getting easier for diverse candidates to thrive in municipal politics. Canada is becoming more diverse as a nation, and views on issues like race, gender, and sexual orientation are becoming more inclusive. But running for political office isn't becoming more accessible or inclusive at the same rate. Candidates from underrepresented communities still feel shut out.

The risk is greater than the reward. Potential candidates are assessing the pros and cons before they even think about filing nomination papers. Increasingly, they're

determining the risks outweigh the benefits, and they're deciding not to run. Concerted efforts are needed to address this barrier.

Candidates from underrepresented communities **want to engage and be engaged in local politics.** Participants shared that they want to be a part of and participate in democratic processes and to see more representation in all levels of government. They are motivated by the desire to create positive changes for their communities, develop policy, change legislation for the better, and lead where they live. This motivation was further strengthened by family ties to politics.

Candidates need cheerleaders and community supporters. Support from family, friends and community is paramount in one's decision to run for elected office. People need to feel rooted in their community and know that local organizations and community influencers and advocates have their back. Additionally, it's helpful to have donors or sponsors to help with the financial burden of running a campaign.

There are more barriers than enablers. Participants cited a fear of discrimination, bullying and harassment, and the impact to their mental health, as deterrents against running for office. Finances, lack of access to volunteers, donors, mentors, and campaign training were also identified as barriers to running a strong campaign. Finally, it was noted that for diverse candidates, it's particularly challenging to successfully run against an incumbent.

Research Results



20 report recommendations broken into 3 categories:

Ways to better support diverse candidates

Shifting the mainstream cultural and environmental context

Systematic changes and advocacy stances

“

We are talking about things like shoveling snow. You shouldn't be threatening to kill my family. ”



As somebody who was elected, bullying and harassment was most impactful to me. Four years is a long time. I was lucky enough to have colleagues and friends to support me, but it's a small subset of people for support compared to the damage people can do to you online.

We are talking about things like shoveling snow. You shouldn't be threatening to kill my family.

If that's what people who are thinking of running see – they're going to turn around and say, 'is it worth it to me?'

– **Jasvinder Sandhu** – Chair, Healthy Democracy Project Advisory Group; Former Councillor, Town of Oakville; Founder and Principal, SLPC Law; children's author

Day One: Diverse Representation Matters

Diversity is key to a healthy democracy. But research indicates people of diverse backgrounds are hesitant to step forward – for many reasons. And, even if they do, they sometimes find themselves wondering what they signed up for, and why there are such limited support systems for elected officials.

Day one of the Healthy Democracy Forum focused on the importance of diverse representation and sharing of AMO's research that mapped the experiences of candidates running for municipal office in Ontario.

Participants were deeply engaged in a panelist discussion that explored the different types of supports that exist for candidates and the strengths and limitations of those supports.

There are, from AMO's exploration, several different types of candidate attraction and support organizations:

- Local, on the ground, campaign schools – a number of whom were represented at the Forum including Politics NOW, The Jean Collective, electHER Now, and Leadership féminin Prescott-Russell
- National, identity-based groups like Operation Black Vote Canada, Proud Politics, Equal Voice, The Canadian Muslim Vote and others
- Municipally-driven efforts or partnerships between the City of Hamilton and the Hamilton YWCA
- A national digital candidate support platform, Nominee

In the afternoon, attendees were guided through two hands-on workshops, where participants were asked to record their thoughts, ideas and insight about the gap that exists between candidates and candidate support systems, and how, collaboratively, we can recruit more people from diverse communities to run for office.

AMO will use this feedback and data to shape future Healthy Democracy work.





“Even as I sit at council tables and I’m the only Black woman, someone will always say to me, ‘remember, you’re not sitting alone’.”

– **Colleen James**, Councillor,
Region of Waterloo, Founder and
Principal Consultant, Divonify

“There is no better way to change the world than to run for office.”

– **Jordan Simmons**,
Co-Founder, Nominee

“We tell ourselves the story that woman don’t run, and they don’t win; that racialized people don’t run, and they don’t win – especially in rural communities – and it’s not true. It’s just not true. We have to tell better stories.”

– **Amanda Kingsley Malo**, Founder,
PoliticsNOW



“ You’re enough –
you don’t need a
perfect resume. „

When we work together, we don’t just change the electoral landscape, we transform it into a place where inclusive and diverse voices can be shared. You’re enough – you don’t need a perfect resume. What you need is the courage to stand up.

– **Melissa Durrell**, Founder, Waterloo Campaign School;
former City of Waterloo Councillor; CEO and Chief
Strategist of Durrell Communications

“Thank you to AMO for talking about the things that are hard to talk about. ,,”

It's nearly 2030, and we're still sitting around 30% women elected federally. That's not good enough. We all need to muscle in and make politics a place that is good and safe and valuable.

We need to have these conversations where we unpack the risk versus reward. There are rewards – when you get to govern and make a real impact – and those are the moments of light that we have to talk about more.

– **Chi Nguyen**, Executive Director, Equal Voice



Day One: Engaging Youth in Local Democracy and Elections

The future of democracy is promising with our youth at the helm.

The Healthy Democracy Forum youth session brought together 35 bright young minds who participated in workshops and activities to delve into the world of local government, facilitated by non-profit organization Apathy is Boring.

Topics of the day included:

- How local councils and elected officials can better engage young people in municipal government
- How youth-focused organizations across the province are breaking down barriers to youth civic engagement and participation
- How all levels governments can work to build trust and rapport with younger generations
- Using youth leadership to help municipalities become youth allied

Our youth session was confirmation that there are brighter days ahead. As Apathy is Boring would say, "Youth are essential in all of this – because they are hardwired to make stuff happen."



I love being informed about what's going on in my community, and I want to be an informed voice. I want to have an informed opinion, because some day, I'm going to be voting on these issues – I want to know how they will affect the community, me, and other people like me. I have learned here today that municipalities have much more power than I thought they did – and I think that's something a lot of kids my age will come to find out if they get involved.

– **Charlie Ochu**, School Trustee for Halton District School Board and Youth Engagement Session participant



“ I have learned here today that municipalities have much more power than I thought they did. ”



“ We can do dark and stormy – we’ve got each other’s backs. ”

Whenever it feels kind of dark and stormy, the best thing to do is to spend some time with a group of engaged young people. Yesterday I got to do that – sit down with some smart, caring young folks, who had questions and comments and ideas that were like fire. And that’s what puts the joy and hope back into the dark stormy times. That’s why we’re all doing this.

We need to, and should, centre young people in our work. They’re ready, they want to contribute. We should be listening and involving them. We can do dark and stormy – we’ve got each other’s backs.

– **The Honourable Bernadette Clement**, *Government of Canada*

Day two: Accelerating Local Democratic Engagement

Participants spent the first day of the forum gaining an understanding of the barriers and challenges stacked against diverse candidates running for office. Day two was spent learning what AMO is doing about it.

Local Democracy Accelerator

The Local Democracy Accelerator aims to rebuild hope and trust in local democracy and improve democratic engagement through practical solutions.

AMO has chosen four communities across Ontario to be part of this pilot project. Community partners – residents who care deeply about democracy in their municipality – will work with AMO to identify local challenges and get to work solving them on a small scale.

This approach allows AMO to test ideas and solutions with real people in real places, and assess their viability, before implementing them on a larger scale and sharing best practices across municipalities. It also ensures that diverse voices are not only heard but actively shape the solutions that best fit their communities.

The Democratic Solutions Bank Prototype

Knowledge shared is power multiplied. AMO's democratic solutions bank offers flexible and adaptable solutions that have already been tried and tested in other municipalities across North America and are adaptable and replicable in other places.

The Solutions Bank includes a wealth of data, and allows users to search for policies, reports, funding opportunities, local initiatives, and more, from a variety of solution partners and places.

This is just the beginning. There are already hundreds of searchable ideas and solutions in the bank, and it will only continue to grow.

Check out the Solutions Bank prototype [here](#) or scan the QR code:



The Grey Highlands Municipal League – a non-partisan group residents and organizations committed to boosting civic engagement in their municipality – shared their creative approach to promoting the 2022 municipal election. They took a non-conventional approach to community outreach and engagement, including things like a “candidate menu” mailout, a campaign calling for “municipally curious” people to step forward and run for council, and an engagement strategy for increased voter turnout.

“Democracy is something you have to work at 365 days a year.”



Toxicity is eroding the foundations of democracy. But we know anger is simply a reflection of fear, and we need to address that at the root. For us to have a strong, healthy democracy, we need people to feel like they can participate at every single level, whether they're the mayor, or if they just cast a ballot. Democracy is something you have to work at 365 days a year.

– **Chris Erl**, Researcher,
Toronto Metropolitan
University's Democracy
Engagement Exchange



“ When we empower diversity at governance tables, we improve our local democracy. „

AMO is doing amazing work. They have started strong with the data. It's so unique and it's not dry, statistical data. It's completely inspiring to me because we know that politics should be for everyone, but we must dedicate real resources to that task.

We need to address disinformation, misinformation and toxicity through a systematic approach of positive engagement. I think we can do that – and we can be optimistic ourselves. People are more excited for a positive vision than a negative one.

Representation matters because it leads to real policy change. When we empower diversity at governance tables, we improve our local democracy.

– **Rawlson King**, Councillor, City of Ottawa



Thank you to everyone for participating!

View all Forum presentations [here](#) or scan the QR code:



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