



POLICY BRIEF

October 2022

MUNICIPAL ELECTION ENNUI

Municipal elections will be held in Ontario on October 24th.¹ Yawn right?! If past statistics on electoral turnout bear true again, you probably have not been following local politics and likely will not vote. This sense of apathy is what many point to as a growing deficit in our local democracy.

The average province-wide turnout in the last municipal elections (2018) was just over 40%.² In North Frontenac, for example, only 37 of 5,984 eligible voters (or less than 1%) cast a ballot. Some point to low voter turnout and question the mandate for successful candidates. We don't think we are yet at risk of illegitimate government but it would be interesting to determine the tipping point for minimal legitimacy: is it 25%, 10%, 0%? (perhaps that's a piece for another day).

But, so what if we ignore municipal politics? The garbage keeps getting picked up. The traffic lights continue to function. The buses continue to run more or less on time. However, if one agrees that a key pillar of a strong democracy is accountability to the voters, then voter ennui is a problem. How

does one go about representing all constituents when only about a third even bother to show up?

Low voter participation in municipal elections is also perplexing, since it is the local council who is at the front line of ensuring the delivery of local services that affect everyday life. These are also the people that are critical to establishing and executing on the vision for what direction a community takes and how it will look in the future. The decisions made by council shapes your daily life and yet most residents remain disinterested.

Another worrisome trend is the increased lack of competition for the municipal positions up for grabs. People seem more and more disinclined to put their names forward for municipal service. In Ontario this year, 692 incumbents have chosen not to run again³, compared to 607 in 2018. Already 139 candidates for mayor/reeve have been acclaimed...without a single vote cast. Of the 548 acclamations already registered, 122 are new candidates (i.e., not incumbents or known entities seeking another term). What gives?

1. BC, Manitoba, Yellowknife and NWT hamlets are also holding local elections this October.
2. By comparison, the lowest average turnout for a federal election was 59% in 2008.
3. A total of 2,860 municipal positions are up for election province-wide this year.

Three possible factors are identifiable:

1. A CHANGING PORTFOLIO

Many communities are experiencing fast and unfamiliar transition. Demographic, culture and geographic shifts have placed increased service demands on local decision-makers and rate-payers. In addition there are increasing expectations for council to weigh in on a host of issues like social justice and climate change. There is nothing inherently wrong with such evolving expectations – it's just that municipalities may not necessarily have the institutional capacity to deal with the associated governing complexities.

It all amounts to a more complicated, ever-expanding job – and for many municipalities the job is only “part-time”. Like in many other fields, heightened expectations to perform complex tasks with only “corner of the desk” attention creates sub-optimal conditions for performance.

2. HEIGHTENED TOXICITY

Perhaps it is a sign of the times, perhaps it is a consequence of the changing expectations, but municipal politics is not immune to the broader toxic culture wars. Political engagement has become notably fraught with polarized hostility and finger-pointing. Civility and reasoned debate have given way to personal attacks through social media and on the streets. Who needs it?

3. LACK OF CAPACITY

Municipalities lie at the bottom tier of public fiscal sourcing, often relying on provincial and federal funding to augment budgets established by residential and commercial taxes. There may be growing expectations of what municipalities should do or have jurisdictional authority over, but the fiscal capacity and necessary authorities have not kept pace for municipalities alone to deliver.

In short, it's a complex job, with limited capacity and an increasingly toxic environment – all told, it is not the most compelling job sales pitch.

IS THERE A SOLUTION?

Based on the above, holding municipal office has lost the appeal it once may have had. A course correct on two fronts may move us towards reversal of this deterioration in local democracy.

First, holding municipal office should be treated as the serious and full-time endeavour it is. This means providing resources in the form of staff and other supports to elected officials. And, the growing importance of the job should be reflected in office holder salaries. If the wish is to capture one's full-time attention, those individuals should be paid and supported accordingly. This alone will not overcome all the negatives for those contemplating public office, but, it's a start.

Secondly, constituents need to take local politics more seriously. Voter apathy – the easiest and most visible measure of civic engagement – undermines the seriousness of the job and breeds a narrowing of perspectives by decision-makers. It also establishes an environment in which the squeaky wheel gets the grease. Council decisions can become increasingly skewed and seem out of touch, leading to frustrations with council and more apathy and disenfranchisement. A vicious circle.

Now comes the call for you to vote – just kidding. There is lots of writing out there already imploring you to vote. So vote – or don't; but spare a thought for those around the world fighting for that right.

Election day is an important part of the democratic process. But election day, in our view, is more the starting gun than the finish line. Participation by those in the community who care – and really who doesn't – means staying engaged throughout the next four years.

Pre-pandemic political apathy, at all levels of government, is no longer a luxury that any of us can afford.

Stay tuned.