



Low Voter Turnout: Strengthening Participation in Local Democracy

Prepared for Councillor Rob Deutschmann

Mar 10, 2023

On October 24th 2022 municipal elections were held in Waterloo Region with a turnout as low as 20%. Public concern about this historically low turnout prompted Waterloo Regional Councillor Rob Deutschmann (Kitchener) to initiate a community discussion beginning with this panel. The invited panellists were:

- **Andrea Perella**, Professor of Political Science at Wilfrid Laurier University
- **Matt Rodrigues**, Community Builder & Urban Planner
- **Melissa Bowman**, Housing Advocate, Writer & Publisher of the *Citifed* Blog
- **Jörg Broschek**, Professor of Political Science at Wilfrid Laurier University
- **Sam Nabi**, Business owner and grassroots organiser in Waterloo Region

Alongside these panellist participants from the audience (Kari Williams, Brooklin Wallis, Ayo Owodunni, Joshua Olivierio, and Jeniffer Ross) spoke up. Presentations and commentary included

- Historical overview of voting turnout and strategies for re-engaging voters
- Recent experiences of election candidates
- Impact of recent bylaw changes to election awareness
- Electoral reform: ranked ballots, citizen's assemblies, changes to the voting age
- Grassroots efforts to effect change

The virtual panel was moderated by Councillor Deutschmann who began with the powerful statement that “...*democracy has been dying for decades, and we have 90 minutes to fix it*”. It is available to view on [Youtube](#).

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Waterloo Region Electoral Context: 2021-2022

Democratic engagement helps to ensure that all citizens have a voice in the political process and can participate in decision-making that affects their lives. By participating in elections, attending public meetings, and engaging in activism, individuals can hold elected officials accountable, influence policy outcomes, and promote a more representative and responsive government. In turn, this helps to strengthen democratic institutions, protect civil liberties, and promote equality and justice for all citizens.

But... democratic engagement at the ballot box is fading away. Recent elections in Waterloo Region have had voter turnout ranging from 62% in the federal general election to 20% in the Kitchener City Council elections. Before moving to the panellists, an overview of recent elections is in order!

The Region of Waterloo has a population of more than 600,000 people and is structured as a two-tier municipality consisting of 3 urban/suburban cities (Cambridge, Kitchener, and Waterloo) and 4 rural townships (North Dumfries, Wellesley, Wilmot, and Woolwich).

The first election to take place was a federal election, called early by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on August 15th 2021 with a vote on September 21st 2021. A provincial election followed on June 2nd 2022. In the Federal and Provincial legislatures, Waterloo Region is represented by 5 ridings (Cambridge, Kitchener Centre, Kitchener Conestoga, and Kitchener South Hespeler). These elections returned unchanged governments in both cases - a Liberal Party of Canada minority nationally, and a Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario majority provincially. Municipal elections were held on October 24th 2022, deciding local representation for two levels of government and school boards.

- **2021 Federal General Election** 5 Ridings, contested by **29 candidates** representing 8 parties and 1 independent candidate.
- **2022 Provincial General Election** 5 Ridings, contested by **31 candidates** representing 8 parties.
- **2022 Municipal Election - City & Township Councils** Each city and township has a council consisting of 1 mayor, and a number of councillors ranging from 3 to 10. Across Waterloo Region, there were **15 candidates** for Mayor and **136 candidates** for Ward Councillor.
- **2022 Municipal Election - Regional Council** The Mayors of each city and township are ex officio regional councillors. The Regional Chair is directly elected from across Waterloo Region (**3 candidates**), and 8 directly-elected Councillors for the cities (**30 candidates**).

- **2022 School Board Elections** Finally, there are four school boards that operate within Waterloo Region, and each has an elected board of trustees.
 - Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB) - **39 candidates** for 11 trustee seats in 4 voting regions.
 - Waterloo Catholic District School Board (WCDSB) - **18 candidates** for 9 trustee seats in 3 voting regions.
 - Conseil Scolaire Catholique MonAvenir - 15 candidates for 12 trustee seats in 12 voting regions. This board encompasses more than Waterloo Region, with 1 trustee representing Waterloo/Brant/Haldimand/Norfolk. This trusteeship was contested by **3 candidates**.
 - Conseil Scolaire Viamond - 18 candidates¹ for 12 trustee seats in 12 voting regions. Because this board encompasses more than just Waterloo Region, it's worth noting that of these 12 trustees, 1 represents Waterloo/Wellington/Middlesex/Perth/Huron (a different area than the other French board). This trusteeship was contested by **2 candidates**.

Taken together, we can see how complex our electoral period was. Over the course of 436² days, 8 elections were contested with 306 candidates. There will, of course, be future elections. All levels are guided by fixed election date legislation, although there always the possibility that an early election is held. The next federal elections are expected to be held on or before October 20th 2025, though the minority government situation makes this especially unpredictable. The next provincial and municipal elections in Waterloo Region are expected on June 4th 2026 and October 26th 2026 respectively. Depending on the timing of future federal and provincial elections, the riding boundaries may change due to a planned redistribution. Finally, byelections could happen at any point to fill a mid-term vacancy. Voters in Kitchener Centre will see this, as their MPP has announced her resignation for later in 2023.

In the context of these recent elections, 5 panellists were invited to share their knowledge and experience of voter engagement and participation with a virtual audience.

¹ As of writing this report, there was no information about candidates for the Toronto Centre voting region, so there may have been more candidates than are claimed here.

² It was longer than this. Because of an error on the ballot, the election for WCDSB trustees in Cambridge was delayed until November 25 adding another month for voters.

Andrea Perrella: Disengagement From Elections



Andrea Perrella
Associate Professor - Political
Science at Wilfrid
Laurier University

Andrea Perrella is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Wilfrid Laurier University³ in Waterloo. He researches public opinion, political participation, and the media. His research has been published in a variety of scientific journals and edited volumes, including the Canadian Journal of Political Science, Canadian Public Policy, International Journal of Press/Politics, and Journal of Urban Affairs among others. He also regularly serves as a source for media interviews on topics that pertain to elections and contemporary political issues.

Andrea began the panel with a short history of declining voter turnout, considering both elections and referenda, and considering some of the underlying causes. He showed that there have been historical periods with both high and low turnouts. But looking beyond the “noise” of historic turnout, his data shows a broad decline in provincial and federal elections, as well as referenda. The effects are visible in Canada, its provinces, the United States, and the United Kingdom. *“Something happened in the late 80s, early 90s, that turned off a lot of voters, not just municipally, pretty much everywhere.”* Despite these declines, there are significant discrepancies - Quebecers vote in Quebec elections more than Canadians vote in Canadian elections, for example.

Prof Perrella discussed some factors that appear to correlate with turnout including demographic age, workforce participation, unemployment rates, and ruralness.

- “Older” Communities vote at higher rates
- Communities with higher workforce participation vote at higher rates
- Communities with lower unemployment vote at higher rates
- Ruralness has a slight impact in that more “rural” communities vote at slightly higher rates, but the effect is less than the other aspects.

These factors are seen in a list of the Canadian federal ridings with the highest (and lowest) voter turnouts

Concluding his comments, he described an erosion of our mid-twentieth-century social contract - that hard work would be returned in general affluence, and that participation in traditional democratic processes was a required part of this contract. A perception that this contract is no longer relevant (or at least as relevant) has led voters to disconnect from the election process. As an incomplete replacement for this motivation, a person’s

³ <https://www.wlu.ca/academics/faculties/faculty-of-arts/faculty-profiles/andrea-perrella/index.html>

identity or political party affiliation, or indeed a person's rage about specifics or generalities, is often seen as the impetus for voting.

Takeaway

- There has been a decades-long disengagement from voting at local, sub-national, and national levels.
 - Even though turnout can be a very complicated problem to study and discuss, there is a wealth of data to support research, and there are hints about the root causes.
 - Connecting voter turnout to a shared commitment to the social contract leads to an important conversation.
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Matt Rodrigues: Connection & Awareness



Matt Rodrigues
2022 Regional
Council Candidate

Matt Rodrigues ran as a Kitchener Candidate for Regional Council in the 2022 municipal election. His platform focused on building a community that left no one behind, as a forward-thinking, responsive, and connected Region. He is an urban planner by trade and served as the former Chair of Kitchener's Active Transportation & Trails Advisory Committee. As a renter who does not own a car and relies on public transit and cycling, Matt understands how we can and need to improve these services across Kitchener, and continues to advocate in those spaces.

Matt Rodrigues took us through his experience in the 2022 municipal election, where he was a candidate for Waterloo Regional Council (Kitchener). He highlighted his experience connecting with residents, the effects of incumbency, and changes to sign bylaws. Lack of awareness among voters, the convenience of voting stations, and long ballots stood out as factors that contribute to a lowering of turnout.

Since elected regional councillors represent the entire city, running for one of these positions (4 in Kitchener, 2 each in Cambridge and Waterloo) is similar to running for mayor in terms of the audience and scale of the campaign. There is significant geography to be covered - more than just about any other election. Kitchener represents all or part of 3 provincial/federal ridings and a population of about a quarter million.

The socioeconomic status of the community was reflected in their level of overall awareness of the election. Levels of awareness of the election were very low well into the election campaign. Even into September people had a lack of awareness of the election, what a voting card was, how to get a voting card and when election day was. The ability to commit time to learning about candidates and issues is a privilege that not every voter has. There were clear signs of voter fatigue, as it was the 3rd election in the last year.

Matt spoke to the recent changes to sign bylaws, as this was the first municipal election in Waterloo Region with a bylaw prohibiting signs on public property. This had the positive impact of levelling the playing field. Large signs are about \$30 a pop and are a financial barrier to many, requiring many resources to get them out and maintain them. Conversely, the reduction in election signs served to lower election visibility. Voters didn't see as many regular reminders about the election. Certain areas had lots of signs, but many had very few. Matt's conclusion is that with limitations on signage, there is an increased need for promotion of the election, which could (and should) include paid social media, and paid signs on public property advertising the election. If we continue

to ban signs we need more of an awareness campaign, independent of individual candidates.

He also considered the need for different voting options, including more dates, more and different locations, and different means of voting. Consider Downtown Kitchener as an example: It has a large population and a large proportion of people without cars, but their only voting location at a community centre located quite a distance away.

Takeaway

- With signs prohibited on public property, the engagement and awareness they lead to must be replaced through other means.
 - Government institutions have a responsibility to drive education and engagement in elections and voting.
 - Accessibility of voting needs to be intentionally addressed through different dates, locations and methods of voting.
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Melissa Bowman: Barriers & Responsibility



Melissa Bowman
Waterloo Region
Yes In My Back Yard

Melissa Bowman is a community advocate interested in city-building, local politics, and social justice. She writes the weekly blog [Citified](https://citified.substack.com/)⁴, which explores many of those issues. In 2018, she ran for Kitchener City Council. Melissa is also co-founder of Waterloo Region Yes In My Backyard⁵ (WR YIMBY), a grassroots group that urges the cities of Waterloo Region to allow for more housing, especially affordable housing. Melissa can be found on [Mastodon](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).

People who engage with the city are often those who have concerns. It has been reported that less than 20% of people who come to public consultations are in favour of the relevant projects. In response, Melissa co-founded WR YIMBY to advocate for planning and development policies from an evidence-based and regional perspective without focussing on singular issues.

Local elections can be complex and voters need to do the work themselves to figure out who to support since there aren't political parties. Balots include Mayor, City Councillor, Regional Councillor, Regional Chair and School board trustees. It's a lot of names to remember and for many requires a "cheat sheet" to remember who they want to vote for.

Melissa gave the example of the Grey Highlands Municipal League⁶ (GHML), a non-partisan group formed to increase engagement in their municipality leading up to (and during) the 2022 municipal elections. They decided to spend \$1 per voter on an awareness campaign for both candidate recruitment and voter awareness. While they broke records for candidate recruitment, there was no matching increase in voter turnout. From this effort, the League advises that intentional voter engagement must happen across the entire 4 year period. This effort begins by having them feel engaged in the budget process and how their money is being spent. They suggest hosting events such as policy debates, and mounting fun educational awareness campaigns. The GHML advocates, as have other speakers on this panel, that municipalities have a responsibility to drive voter engagement and should be spending at least \$2 per voter.

Melissa noted that some feedback was collected on the election by the cities of Guelph and Kitchener. However, most of the people who would respond to a survey like this are also likely to be the same people who voted and we need to hear from those who didn't

⁴ <https://citified.substack.com/>

⁵ <https://www.wryimby.com/>

⁶ <https://www.votegrey.ca/>

vote. Without understanding the motivations and experiences of those that chose not to vote, or were unable to vote, it's hard to see significant improvements in the future.

Suggestions for Ranked Ballots could be a way to increase voter turnout. A ranked ballot is a voting system where voters rank the candidates on the ballot in order of preference, rather than simply selecting a single candidate. The system is designed to ensure that the winning candidate has broad support from voters and to eliminate the need for separate runoff elections. They are used in a number of countries, including Australia, Ireland, and Scotland. In Ontario, the City of London used them in 2018, but the option to do so was removed by the province with Bill 218 in 2020.

There are lots of examples of small things we can do to remove existing barriers and encourage more people to engage with local issues. But it's important to focus on the issues of disengagement and low turnout, not only at election time but also for the 4 years between elections.

Takeaway

- Aligning with our other speakers, Melissa wrote on her Citified blog⁷ *“...if you want to boost turnout on election day, it has to be a four-year process. You have to create voter engagement for the entire council term.”*
 - Understanding voter turnout and engagement requires understanding nonvoters and those that are absent from the public conversation, and not just those that are engaged.
 - Apathy and the existence of multi-dimensional barriers must both be considered in a discussion of voter turnout.
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⁷ https://citified.substack.com/p/how-bad-was-it?r=1hpfg0&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email

Jörg Broschek: Re-Engagement with Elections



Jörg Broschek
Associate Professor - Political
Science at Wilfrid
Laurier University

Jörg Broschek holds the Canada Research Chair in Comparative Federalism and Multilevel Governance and is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Wilfrid Laurier University⁸. His research examines how regions, provinces and the federal level respond to economic and political challenges through reform and adaptation. He is a Fellow at the Balsillie School of International Affairs⁹ and serves on the Board of the Canadian Political Science Association¹⁰ (CPSA) as Secretary-Treasurer. Jörg is a passionate resident of Waterloo Region. He has been a member of Kitchener's Active Transportation Advisory Committee¹¹ (ATAC) and the Board of the Mount Hope Breithaupt Park Neighbourhood Association¹² (MHBPN) since 2021.

Jörg discussed four types of non-voter and the prospects for engaging each of them in the voting process, beginning with a group described as “Notoriously Not Interested”. Voters that fall into this category are unlikely to become involved.

A second group is described as “Temporarily Disengaged”, sometimes seeing municipal elections as less important or perhaps disengaged after multiple elections in just over a year. Finally, newcomers to the region might feel out of the loop on issues and candidates that are specific to Waterloo Region. The lack of a party system in municipal elections takes away a shortcut to understanding candidates and platforms. This group may well become re-engaged after a period of time, in a sense recharging their election interest or by becoming more familiar with the Region.

“Alienation 1: Frustrated, often angry, but still privileged” describes a third group believing that politics and political discourse seem to take away privileges or diminish culture, lifestyle, or tradition. For example, a backlash during municipal elections over the lowering of speed limits to 30km/h led to angry outbursts towards candidates. This group responds to their frustrations in different ways, by withholding their participation or by exercising a protest vote and supporting anti-establishment parties. While this group didn't exert a strong influence on recent municipal elections, there is considerable potential for it to grow in the future.

⁸ <https://www.wlu.ca/academics/faculties/faculty-of-arts/faculty-profiles/jorg-broschek/index.html>

⁹ <https://www.balsillieschool.ca/people/jorg-broschek/>

¹⁰ <https://cpsa-acsp.ca/board-of-directors/>

¹¹ <https://www.kitchener.ca/en/council-and-city-administration/advisory-committees-and-boards.aspx>

¹² <http://www.mhbpna.org/>

A fourth and final group is described as “Alienation 2: Structurally disadvantaged, marginalized”. This long-identified group does not participate for a variety of reasons, including class, race, and economic inequality that is often rooted in racial inequality.

After establishing the typology of non-voters, Professor Broschek proposed three areas of reform that could bring those voters back - Education, Addressing social inequalities and inequities, and communication strategies.

Education strategies can include better engagement and experiential learning opportunities for voters such as a citizen’s assembly. A citizens' assembly is a form of deliberative democracy in which a representative group of citizens are randomly selected to come together to learn about and deliberate on a specific issue or set of issues. In Canada, citizens' assemblies have been used to address a variety of issues, including electoral reform, climate change, and health care.

The citizens' assembly process typically involves recruiting a representative group of citizens through a random selection process. These citizens are then given the opportunity to learn about the issue at hand through a variety of educational materials, expert testimony, and public input. The citizens then deliberate together, often facilitated by a neutral moderator, to arrive at a set of recommendations or proposals.

In 2006, the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform was convened to examine alternative electoral systems for the province. The assembly was made up of 103 randomly selected citizens who met for several months to learn about electoral systems and deliberate on the best approach for Ontario. The assembly's recommendations ultimately led to a province-wide referendum on electoral reform, with the following question posed to voters, although the proposed changes were ultimately rejected by voters.

Which electoral system should Ontario use to elect members to the provincial legislature?

- The existing electoral system (First-Past-the-Post)*
- The alternative electoral system proposed by the Citizens' Assembly (Mixed Member Proportional)*

Citizens' assemblies are seen as a way to bring greater public input and engagement to the decision-making process and to ensure that the voices of ordinary citizens are heard and taken into account. They are also seen as a way to promote more thoughtful and informed decision-making, by giving citizens the opportunity to learn about and deliberate on complex issues in a structured and collaborative setting.

Many have advocated for this democratic instrument, including Dave Meslin who has been discussed by Melissa Bowman on this panel. In the United Kingdom, Climate Assembly UK¹³ brought 100+ people together to discuss how the UK should meet greenhouse gas emissions targets.

Jorg was particularly critical of the lack of Indigenous participation in discussions of participation and reflected on the need to see voters and residents as not “just” taxpayers. The opportunity to re-engage voters through Citizens Assemblies is especially exciting.

Takeaway

- In order to understand the reasons for a person to be disengaged from the voting process, we can describe several distinct categories with different motivations.
 - Similarly, there are several approaches to re-engaging voters. These include short-term (Citizens Assemblies) and long-term (addressing inequalities) efforts.
 - Excluding some voices such as Indigenous Peoples, intentionally or not, diminishes democratic processes and institutions.
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¹³ <https://www.climateassembly.uk/>

Sam Nabi: Grassroots Participation



Sam Nabi
Hold The Line
Waterloo Region

Sam Nabi (he/him) is a co-owner of Full Circle Foods¹⁴ and a founding member of Hold The Line Waterloo Region¹⁵. He can be found on [Twitter](#), [Mastodon](#), or at your local DIY music show.

Sam began from the position that voter turnout is a symptom rather than a root problem in and of itself, that residents are aware and concerned about their local environment. He went on to discuss examples of this that exist outside of elections and ballots. Writing on his blog¹⁶, Sam says *“The best thing we can do between elections is to stay involved, somewhere, somehow, in a cause that’s meaningful to us. The politicians we elected can’t do it on their own.”* Sam introduced the audience to two successful examples of community-building work. While these efforts began outside of elections, they have both become issues in council chambers, courtrooms, and municipal elections. His first example was Hold the Line Waterloo Region, an advocacy organization formed to protect the countryside boundary line *“...which is the line that separates Waterloo Region’s rural areas, farmland and protected environmental land, from our urban areas. That line was created in the Waterloo Region growth management strategy. It’s a way to stop urban sprawl from going too fast [and] from going too far.”* Advocates and Councils, working together, have defended the Line. Elements of the campaign have included participatory engagement activities including food, music, and bike rides to inform, and to create and maintain broad and lasting commitment.

Sam’s second narrative shared his experience in the creation of pedestrian-focussed space on Gaukel St near Willor River (Victoria) Park in Kitchener. This sprung from a recognition that there is insufficient public space and parkland in the downtown core of Kitchener and that streets are very car-centric. A coalition between business owners, Business Improvement Associations, and engaged residents to create a temporary pedestrian-only space on unused road space. This temporary space has now become permanent as a result of this effort, and a second conversion is planned near the Kitchener Market in 2023.

“...the family who owns a dog, know there are not enough dog parks downtown”

“...high school students, said there are not enough basketball nets and skate parks downtown.”

“...musicians, they wanted to see a little performance stage on Gaukel Street.”

¹⁴ <https://fullcirclefoods.ca/>

¹⁵ <https://www.holdthelinewr.org/>

¹⁶ <https://samnabi.com/blog/organizing-between-elections>

The lessons from these grassroots efforts give inspiration for building a coalition of engaged and active residents, that can affect change without waiting for elections or Councils. They also show that it is not a single coalition, but rather an ad hoc one that emerges organically in reaction to a particular concern.

Takeaway

- Voting and elections aren't the only way to engage in local democracy. Grassroots and ground-up engagement can change the communities we live in.
 - People and residents are more aware than they are often given credit for being. They know what they would like to have, but engaging with them means putting in the effort.
 - The need for green space and space dedicated to human interaction cannot be neglected in democratic conversations, but often is.
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Audience Voices

Following the panellist presentations, we were fortunate to have many voices in the audience that shared their formal and informal experiences of local democracy in Waterloo Region, of Citizens Assemblies, and the need to expand inclusion to younger voters.

This time was a little different than the last time. I did find that people were significantly less engaged than they were. The most engaged people were downtown. There was a particular issue that they were focused on, which was the homeless encampments. When I got out into the suburbs, people were more concerned about things like the reduction of garbage bags”

Kari Williams, Waterloo Regional Councillor

But there was one quote that I repeat a lot that a person while canvassing told me just some citizen I was speaking to and they said to me that being able to pay attention to politics is a privilege. And that is something that we need to actively dismantle. We need to make it as easy to get into as possible, it needs to be easy to learn as much about your city as possible and about your candidates.

Brooklin Wallis, Candidate for Kitchener for City Council (2022)

When I went door to door knocking, I would hear things like “Oh, there's another election coming up? Which one is this one now?” I've had times when people would ask “What party do you represent?” I had someone shut the door on me because they said they only talked to a certain party

Ayo Owodunni, Kitchener City Councillor

There's an idea about lowering the voting age to 16. I've spoken with MPs from various political backgrounds, and there's some research overseas that shows if we lower the voting age to 16 we're able to have them vote once they get really busy. They go through university, they go through that post-secondary education non-voter period. And then when they have a job, they have more stable living conditions, then they return to voting. And then that becomes a habit.

Joshua Olivierio, podcaster (joshuaoliverio.com/)

The citizen's assembly was Ontario wide and it was on workers' democracy and their voice. We were chosen by sortition. 1200 invitations went out to people, and we had 32 participants from all over Ontario, young, old, and minorities of all kinds. And the most remarkable thing I found was the ease of consensus. There's a concern that urban and rural

people are in opposition to each other, but it wasn't true at all! People want a job, they want a bit of respect, they want their input to be relevant.

Jennifer Ross, on participating in a Citizen's Assembly

Councillor Deutschmann captured the spirit of many speakers by observing that *"Democracy is a lot of work, and sometimes we don't realize that we have to put in that time."* The audience appreciated an eclectic and relevant discussion of voter turnout - the causes, impacts, strategies for improvement, and some alternatives. The town hall is available on YouTube, and there will be more town halls. Connect with us online to find out more about future events in this series:

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