

# SUPPORTING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AT YOUR LIBRARY

Public, School and Academic Libraries have an important role to play in supporting their patrons during the election.

As community hubs and trusted local institutions, libraries have the unique capability to convene dialogue and engagement on a wide range of ideas. During an election, this includes hosting events to encourage public engagement and participation in the democratic process.

Libraries have a responsibility to ensure that we preserve the public's trust as an independent organization by carefully avoiding the perception of bias or partisanship, but there is also an opportunity to constructively advocate for non-partisan solutions to ensure that our school, public and First Nations libraries are sustainable and well-resourced.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

You can engage your communities during the elections in a number of ways:

- 1. Host an All-Candidates Forum or Town Hall Meeting**
- 2. Encourage Non-partisan Voter Engagement**
- 3. Voter Engagement on Campus**

## HOST AN ALL-CANDIDATES FORUM OR TOWN HALL MEETING

An all-candidates forum or town hall meeting is a great way to bring together the community to engage on local issues relevant to the election campaign. These events should be accessible, approachable and open to the public, with a participatory atmosphere. Best of all, they provide a great reminder to candidates about the important role of libraries in your community, as well as a chance to ask candidates important questions about issues impacting libraries and library staff in your community.

### PLANNING YOUR EVENT

#### START EARLY

Begin preparation for the event early. It can take time to reach out to candidates and their campaign teams, book a location, and find a moderator. There will also be lots of groups who will be looking to book candidates' time. Keep in mind that media and public interest tends to

## DON'T BE AFRAID TO THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX!

Why not host a **story time with candidates?** This is a great way to engage parents and kids in the election, and to showcase one of the ways that libraries are supporting your communities.

If you have an interesting idea, let us know by emailing Sarah Roberts at [sroberts@accessola.com](mailto:sroberts@accessola.com).

increase closer to the election date so you may have a bigger audience if you are able to secure the event in the last two weeks of the campaign – but early arrangements will be crucial.

## COLLABORATE

Put together a committee to organize the forum. Although one organization can organize the event, an existing community network, representatives from organizations with common interests, or like-minded individuals are often more effective to share tasks to be done. Learn from other local organizations that have experience with this type of event.

### QUICK TIP

**Assign a committee chair** to help ensure that the event is well organized and well run.

## ROLES

Committee members will:

- **Invite all candidates** and campaign teams by email and personal follow-up. It's important that you remain non-partisan and that you provide equal opportunity by inviting all candidates to participate.
- Develop a **key theme** for the event. This could be related to social policy issues, economic development, or other broad issues. Above all, make sure that it is something where you can talk about the priority issues affecting libraries!
- Develop a plan for **community outreach** and **media relations** to get the word out.
- **Liaise with the campaign team** to negotiate the date, time, and length of the event, and **how the event will proceed** (e.g., order of speakers, maximum speaking time, managing a question & answer period), and **outline terms of engagement**.
- **Develop a budget** and plan for any expenses.
- Invite media to cover the event.
- Confirm the location and organize logistics (e.g., accessible venue, seating, stage or front of room set-up, podium, AV equipment, checking all logistics early on the day of the event).
- Create a post-event plan for follow-up.
- Maintain contact with the campaign staff and update them as the event develops. At the event, meet the candidates at the door and escort them to the stage or speaking area.

### QUICK TIP

**Strong moderators are crucial!** Finding an experienced moderator that all candidates will trust is absolutely essential to keeping the event on track in a fair and non-partisan manner and to deal with the unexpected. A moderator could be a well-known media personality, a community board member, or a leader from a post-secondary institution.

## LOCAL EXAMPLES – CORNWALL PUBLIC LIBRARY

For the past three municipal elections Cornwall Public Library has held an “All-Candidates Meet-and-Greet” and Q & A. Members of the community provide questions, and each candidate takes a turn to answer them. Dawn Kiddell, CEO and Chief Librarian at Cornwall Public Library writes:

“The first session (in 2006) was a huge success, with our program room filled beyond capacity (95). For the 2010 and 2014 election we moved it into the center of the library for more space and in 2014 we were maxed-out for space.

This year, Cornwall Public Library will be having an information session for candidates and potential candidates at the library in conjunction with the City Clerk and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs. The Chamber of Commerce will host the main debates at a venue with a larger seating capacity.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE NON-PARTISAN?

Partisan political activity is the direct or indirect promotion of a political candidate or the direct or indirect opposition to a candidate.

As representatives of the library sector, we want you to talk about and share information about our non-partisan issues – which do not favour or criticize a specific candidate – and foster discussion about these important matters. We believe strongly that libraries positively impact a broad cross-section of residents in every community.

## ENCOURAGE NON-PARTISAN VOTER ENGAGEMENT

Public, School, and Academic Libraries have an important role to play in encouraging the democratic participation of their patrons.

### THE BASICS

You can help your patrons by directing them to key information leading up to the election. Consider setting up a voter information table at the library where patrons can access online and hard copy information on the upcoming election. Consider posting information directly on the library website to help connect members of your community to the information they need.

- Check your municipal election registration status: [Voter Lookup](#) – Municipal Property Assessment Corporation
- [Voter's Guide](#) – Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing
- [Information for Candidates](#) – Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing
- [School Board Trustee Elections](#) - Ontario Education Services Corporation (OESC)

### REMAIN NEUTRAL!

When sharing information on candidates, link directly to candidate, rather than interpreting materials or political positions. It's important for the library to remain seen a neutral and trustworthy source of information for the entire community.

### LIBRARY ELECTIONS POLICY

Public Libraries are well advised to have a formal elections policy as part of their Board Policies and Procedures. It should be easy to locate on your library's intranet and website. A reminder should be communicated to staff for every election and one individual designated for questions.

Need help developing an election policy? SOLS has developed a [Sample policy \(SOLS\)](#) to help. You can also review similar policies developed by public libraries such as:

- [Hamilton Public Policy](#)
- [London Public Library](#)

- [Oakville Public Library](#)
- [Bonfield Public Library](#)
- [Toronto Public Library](#)

## OTHER WAYS TO ENGAGE YOUR PATRONS

Libraries across Ontario are promoting civic engagement with innovative programming. Consider putting together a display at your public library.

Some libraries, like the Englehart Public Library, act as the polling station in their areas. In addition to reducing barriers to library patrons voting, by acting as the polling station libraries are able to drastically increase their visibility in the community and surrounding areas.

### EXAMPLE

This spring, the Toronto Public Library launched a new program: [On Civil Society](#). City Librarian Vickery Bowles writes:

“Libraries are, in many ways, the last public spaces where disagreement is accepted and even encouraged. But even this will be lost if we don’t remember that we have to learn how to listen to each other. ‘On Civil Society’ is our chance to listen to each other once again. We will listen to ideas we agree with. We will listen to ideas we don’t agree with. We will find our way into debates and discussions that might make some of us uncomfortable. But this is what the library can offer democracy: a chance to engage in a true and sophisticated way with our fellow citizens: to hear them and to make small steps towards understanding them even when we vehemently disagree with something they believe.”

***Is your library doing something innovative to engage your patrons in civic dialogue? [Drop us a line](#) and let us know!***

## VOTER ENGAGEMENT ON CAMPUS

### Engaging Students at University and Colleges

If you work at a College or University Library, you can play an important role in supporting student civic engagement on campus. Low voter turnout is a serious issue during elections and young people are disproportionately likely to skip the polls. For a lot of your students, this may be their first time voting and it’s important that students feel empowered to make their voices heard.

The library can also promote civic engagement for young people and help your students develop information literacy skills to better understanding candidate.

#### **What can your library do?**

- Connect with your Student Association to see what events they are planning and if there is a role that your library can play;
- Host events for voter engagement at the library;
- Create an exhibit about voting;
- Share information with students on candidate.

Your library can help remove barriers and encourage voter engagement by being a resource for students to learn about:

- Check your municipal election registration status: [Voter Lookup](#) – Municipal Property Assessment Corporation
- [Voter's Guide](#) – Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing
- [Information for Candidates](#) – Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing
- [School Board Trustee Elections](#) - Ontario Education Services Corporation (OESC)

## SCHOOL LIBRARIES

If you work at a School Library, you can help inform and engage your students around the upcoming elections by getting them thinking about voting and the importance of democracy.

### What can your library do?

- Create an exhibit about voting
- Share information with students on platforms
- Host a School-wide "Student Vote" after spending time on candidate stances, especially on student-related issues
- Host an all-candidates meeting or offer space to local politicians to come and talk to students or any forum for students to ask questions

Elections Ontario provides [resources](#) for teachers and students to stimulate discussion and learning about:

- What is voting?
- Who can vote?
- Why can't kids vote?
- Why should people vote?

An election is also a great time to raise awareness about:

- What is an MPP? A City Councillor? Premier?
- What does the Municipal government do?
- What does the Provincial government do?
- What's a "platform"?

### QUICK TIP!

You can include campus and local political groups in your voter engagement. Elections are a great opportunity to encourage wider civic and political engagement on campus.

Remember to stay non-partisan!  
Provide equal opportunity by all candidates to participate.

## FIRST-TIME VOTERS

If you work at secondary school library, some of your students may be voting in their first elections this year and its important they feel empowered to make their voices heard. You can be an information resources to connect them with information on:

- Check your municipal election registration status: [Voter Lookup](#) – Municipal Property Assessment Corporation
- [Voter's Guide](#) – Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing
- [Information for Candidates](#) – Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing
- [School Board Trustee Elections](#) - Ontario Education Services Corporation (OESC)

# ABOUT US

This document was produced by the [Ontario Library Association \(OLA\)](#) and the [Federation of Ontario Public Libraries \(FOPL\)](#). OLA and FOPL work with [Ontario Library Service - North \(OLS - North\)](#), and [Southern Ontario Library Service \(SOLS\)](#) to support excellence in public and First Nations libraries across Ontario. This document was adapted with permission from the [Elections Toolkit](#) produced by the Ontario Non-Profit Network (ONN).

The **Ontario Library Association (OLA)** is the oldest continually-operating non-profit library association in Canada, with over 5,000 members comprised of library staff and supporters from public, school, academic, and special libraries.

The **Federation of Ontario Public Libraries (FOPL)** represents 246 public library systems in Ontario, including 45 First Nations public libraries, in communities throughout the Province.

Together, OLA and FOPL are committed to ensuring that libraries are able to continue to play a critical role in the social, education, cultural and economic success of our communities and schools.

The provincial government funds two public library support agencies: the **Ontario Library Service - North (OLS - North)** and the **Southern Ontario Library Service (SOLS)**. OLS - North and SOLS provide a wide range of support services to public libraries throughout northern and southern Ontario. Their mandate is to deliver programs and services on behalf of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport by increasing co-operation and co-ordination among public library boards and other information providers, and to promote the provision of library services to the public by assisting public library boards with services and programs that reflect their needs, including consulting, training and development services.