

# Locally Grown

A survey of municipal politicians in Canada



In collaboration with the **Canadian Municipal Barometer**



# CMB-BMC

The Canadian Municipal Barometer (CMB) is an annual survey of mayors and councillors in more than 400 municipalities across Canada that provides new insights for academic researchers, municipal policymakers, and the general public. The project is led by Jack Lucas at the University of Calgary, and generously supported by a SSHRC Partnership Development Grant and by contributions from institutional partners, including the University of Calgary, the Institut national de la recherche scientifique, University of Manitoba, Memorial University, the University of Toronto, and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. To learn more, visit [cmb-bmc.ca](http://cmb-bmc.ca).



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## Executive summary

In Canada, federal and provincial legislators tend to command the spotlight, but local politicians have a major impact on Canadians' lives. They are responsible for the public services that Canadians experience most directly, and can meaningfully shape attitudes toward, and expectations of, public institutions. Local governments raise **12% of every tax dollar** (including user fees) and spend 19% of **all government expenditure**. Through the COVID-19 pandemic, local leaders have been continuing to provide essential services, working with local public health boards, protecting transit riders, re-deploying staff, and communicating to the public.

But much less is known about the thousands of municipal politicians who, apart from ensuring potholes are filled and garbage is collected, are designing and redesigning our communities. In 2020, the Samara Centre for Democracy joined a partnership of universities and researchers surveying mayors and councillors in the more than 400 municipalities across Canada. From Corner Brook, Newfoundland, to Squamish, British Columbia, over 940 councillors, mayors, Reeves, and borough councillors responded to the first annual **Canadian Municipal Barometer** survey, shedding light on their paths to politics and lives as local politicians.

Mayors and councillors, newly elected officials and municipal veterans, politicians in urban and rural places—respondents represented a cross section of

Canada's local leaders. Their responses provide a better understanding of who local politicians are, how they experience public life, and what their career paths look like. The survey finds:

→ **City council is not a gateway office:** High-profile examples of municipal politicians making the leap to provincial or federal politics are the exception, not the rule. Only 5% of respondents said it is very likely they will run for provincial or federal office, even after nearly half said they have been actively recruited. Generally speaking, local politicians do not see themselves as a “farm team” for provincial, territorial, or federal politics.

→ **Civil society talent pipeline:** Only a minority of local politicians take an explicitly political path to office, through advocacy, partisan involvement, or holding other offices. Most (56%) point to involvement in community associations and neighbourhood groups as experiences that helped them prepare for public life.

→ **Lonely work, hours vary:** The survey probes the capacity of councillors and mayors, and asks how they spend their time. The one dimension that makes municipal politics distinct from other orders of government is that the job is still often treated as

a part-time commitment, rather than a full-time profession. The result is that half of respondents (49%) are only part-time representatives, and, of those, most (77%) hold other jobs. Three-quarters (76%) of respondents have no staff support.

→ **Not all roads lead to City Hall:** Diversity in representation is pivotal in ensuring all voices can be heard at the decision-making table. The findings of this report confirm that Canadian municipalities have a long way to go in diversifying local government. Only 31%

of respondents are women, 91% are white, 70% are 50 years old or older, and white-collar professionals are heavily overrepresented.

This report, the first of three based on annual surveys of the Canadian Municipal Barometer, examines who makes up Canada’s local political leadership, how local leaders enter public life, their capacity as legislators and representatives, and what they like most and least about the job.

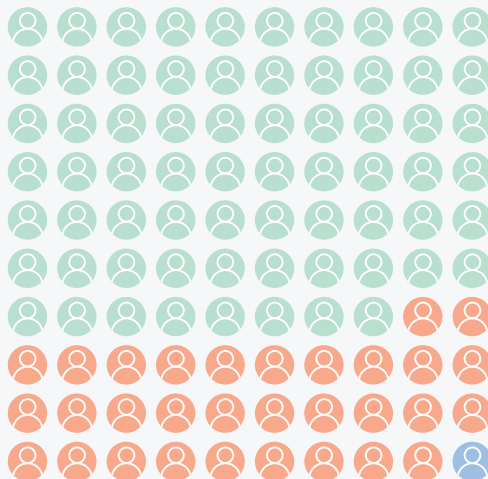


## Who answered the survey?

The Canadian Municipal Barometer captures a strong cross-section of municipal representatives in

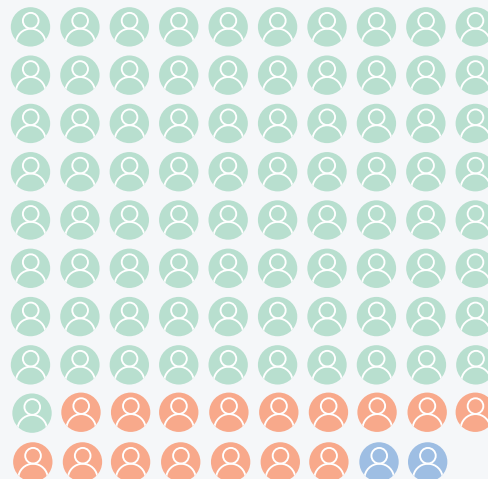
Canada—and reflects some of the demographic skews that characterize the local political class.

### Gender



● Male 68% ● Female 31% ● Prefer not to say 1%

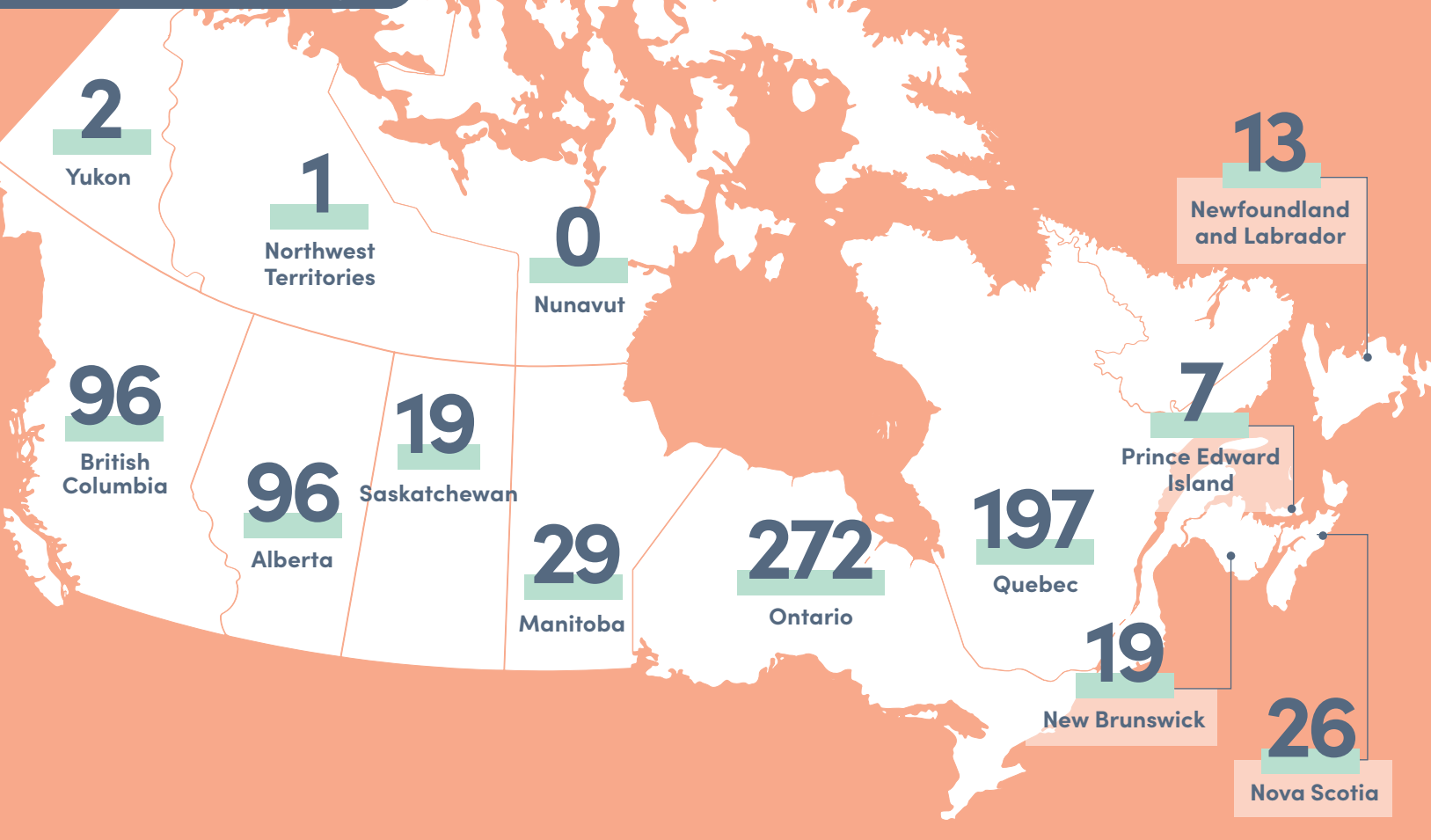
### Position



● Councillor 81% ● Mayor/reeve 16% ● Other 2%

Note: The figures illustrated in this report may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

## Respondents by region



Respondents reflect a blend of urban, rural, and suburban. Twenty-eight per cent of those surveyed represent mostly urban communities, 12% represent mostly rural areas, and the majority (52%) represent a mixed district of urban, suburban, and rural areas.

The respondents are mostly male (67%). This is close to the real gender distribution of municipal politicians; in 2019, [Canadian Municipal Barometer data](#) found that only approximately 31% of local politicians are female. The respondents are also overwhelmingly white (91%). Over a quarter (28%) have a graduate degree (masters, professional, doctorate) and nearly half (48%) have a college or university degree.

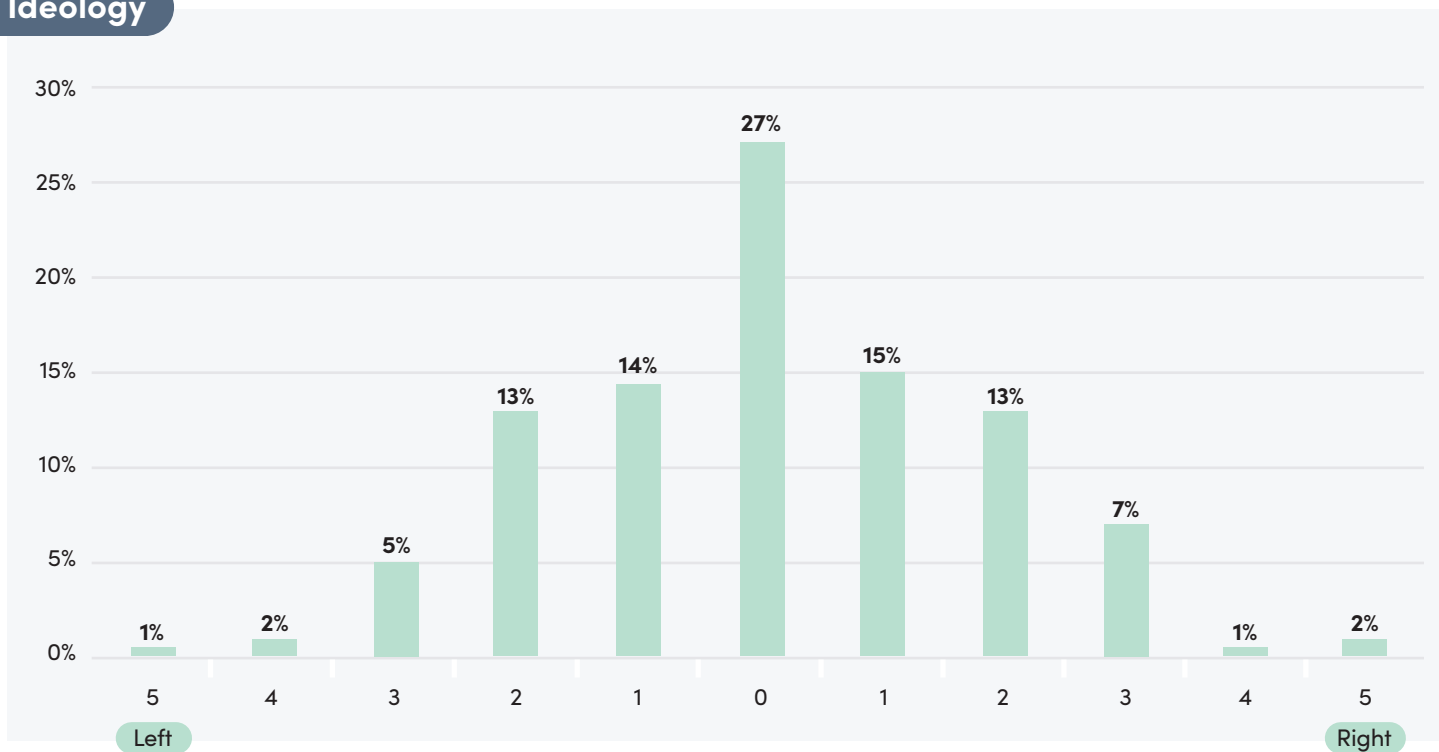
The age distribution is skewed toward older Canadian

ans. A quarter of respondents are over 65 (25%) and 70% of representatives surveyed are over 50. Just 5% are under 35. A majority of politicians (58%) are in their first or second term, though 24% have served for more than 10 years.

In terms of ideology, much like the general Canadian public, local politicians see themselves holding close to the centre. About a quarter of local politicians identify as a “5” on an ideological scale from 0 to 10, with roughly the same proportion on the centre-left (26%) and centre-right (28%).

This ideology distribution varies less than may be expected by type of district (urban, suburban, rural). However, there was notable ideological variance by province

## Ideology



and gender. For instance, nearly half of respondents (47%) in B.C. are left of centre, compared to 16% of respondents in Alberta. The political orientation of women

and men was almost exactly flipped; 42% of women are left of centre and 24% are right of centre, while 30% of men are left of centre and 44% right of centre.



## Where do local leaders come from?

Canadians sometimes perceive politicians as lifers, careerists, and a class apart. The Samara Centre's **past research with federal MPs** has found that they often regard themselves as "accidental" politicians—unlikely to have ended up in the positions they hold.

What about local politicians: how do they find themselves in public life?

The survey provides some clues. It finds common professional backgrounds, with strong overrepresentation of people from professional, management,



and other white-collar careers. But civic organizations also provide a training ground and platform for aspiring local leaders. Many respondents were recruited, or received encouragement to run. Overwhelmingly, local politicians themselves cite their interest in public service and the well-being of their communities as the key motivators for seeking office at the municipal level.

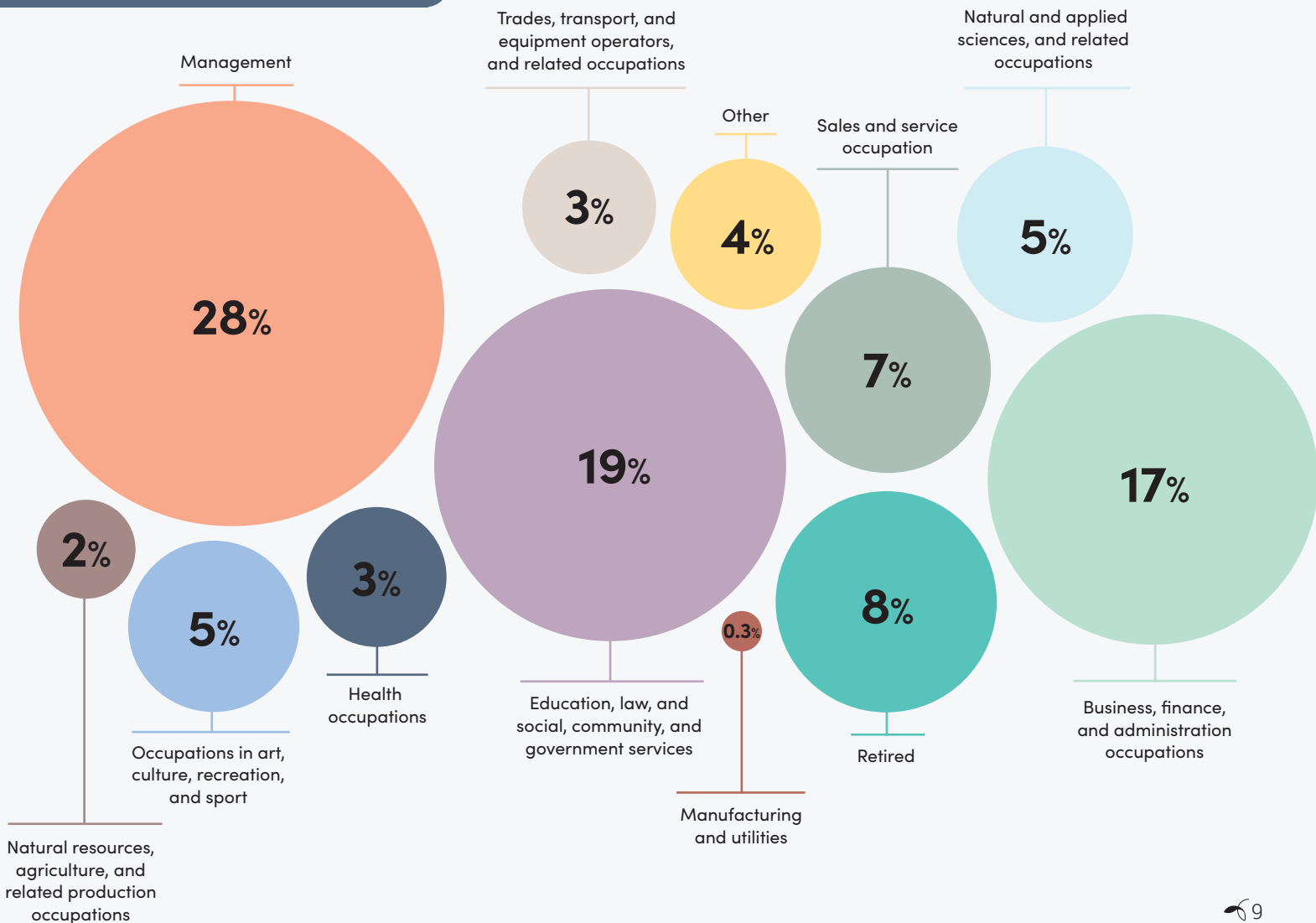
### Professional background

While it is true that local politics draws from a wide range of professional backgrounds, there is marked overrepresentation of those with a management or professional background. The number of corporate

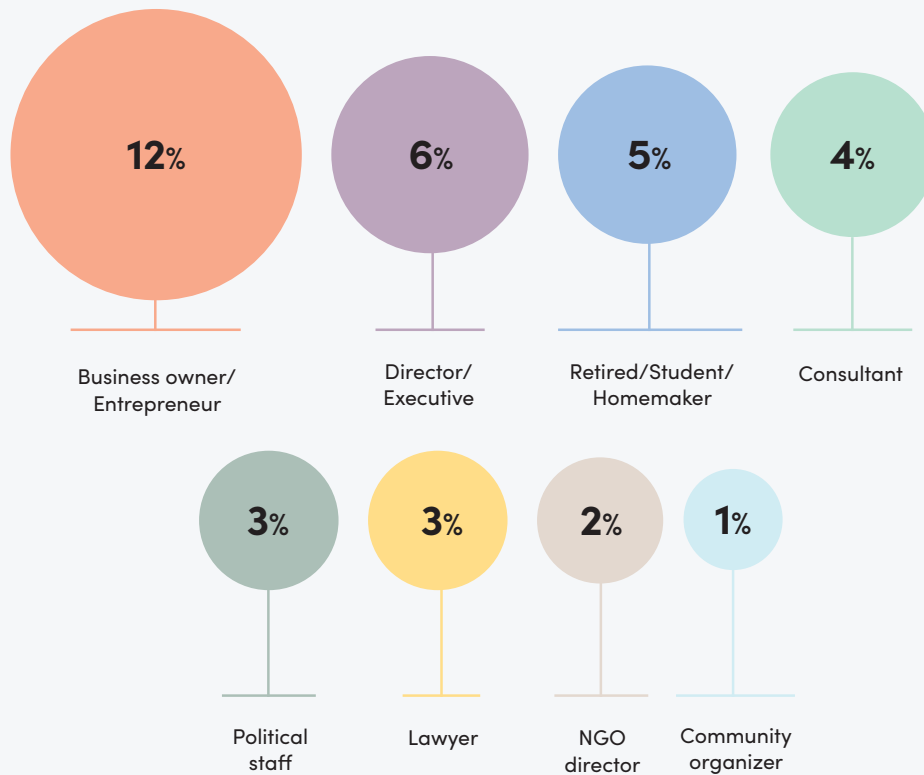
directors and consultants far outweighs the clerks and cashiers, while business owners outweigh them all.

Twenty-eight per cent of respondents had previously worked in management, whereas less than 5% had worked in blue-collar sectors like construction, manufacturing, or natural resources. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of the politicians surveyed came from three white-collar sectors: management; business, finance, and administration; and education, law, social, community, and government services. Class-based and occupational underrepresentation, often overlooked but always present at other levels of politics, are certainly evident at the local level too.

### Occupation before election



## Common former professions



### Civic background

In addition to having similar professional backgrounds, local leaders often share a past involvement in civil society or civic life. Most local politicians surveyed suggest that their path to politics began, or was aided by, experience in community associations. About a third of respondents reported past participation in business associations and service clubs. Just over a quarter had been involved in advocacy. Most respondents had been involved in multiple kinds of associations before being elected to office, while a tiny fraction (27 out of 691 respondents to this question) listed no formative civic engagement.

Though anecdotally it appears to have become

more common for people who held office provincially, territorially or federally to take up municipal politics after retirement or defeat, the data finds that this remains rare. Just 6% of respondents had previously served as school board trustees, further underscoring the absence of an established elected office talent pipeline.

These responses point to the importance of general civic engagement, rather than explicit political engagement. While some local politicians may have been involved in advocacy organizations, and a few in political parties, many more were members of local civic institutions like neighbourhood associations and service clubs.

## Association involvement that helped prepare local leaders for politics

Community association/Neighbourhood association	56%
Business association	36%
Service club	34%
Issue-focused group/Advocacy group	28%
School association/Parent-teacher group	25%
Student politics/Student association/Youth organization	22%
Other	22%
Religious organization/Religious group	16%
Union	15%
Cultural association/Immigrant association/Ethnic association	8%

### Why run?

When asked what first prompted them to seek municipal office, respondents gave a variety of answers in their own words. But most emphasized similar

themes: the importance of public service, of improving the community—or specifically seeking change in the status quo.

### Motivation from within and without

“A group of people came to me and said they wanted me to run and would support me in the election. Can’t say no to that!”

“I saw untapped potential in the community.”

“The closing of our local paper mill.”

“A lifetime community activist, I thought getting on the inside of government would be more effective than lobbying from without.”

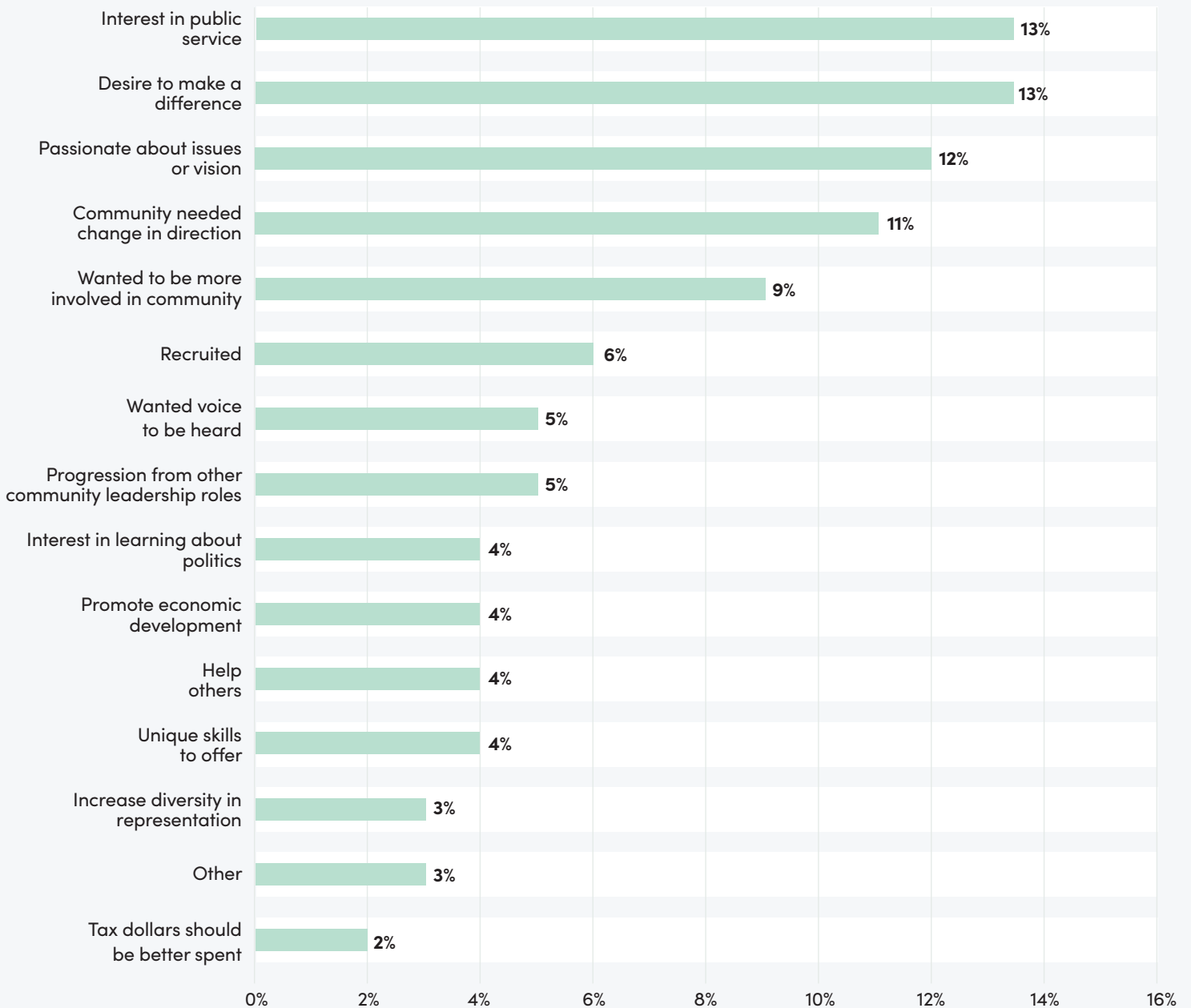
“Creating a cultural and arts policy. As an artist and consultant, I felt that government needs diverse views and opinions.”

“Councillor was an asshole.”

An overriding theme of responses was that politics was simply a way to give back to a community in which representatives were already heavily engaged. The majority of answers (58%) mention the importance of public service, community involvement, or

making changes generally, on specific issues, or in leadership. Less common reasons for running were that they had been recruited, wanted to add their voice in decision-making, or saw running as a natural progression in their civic career.

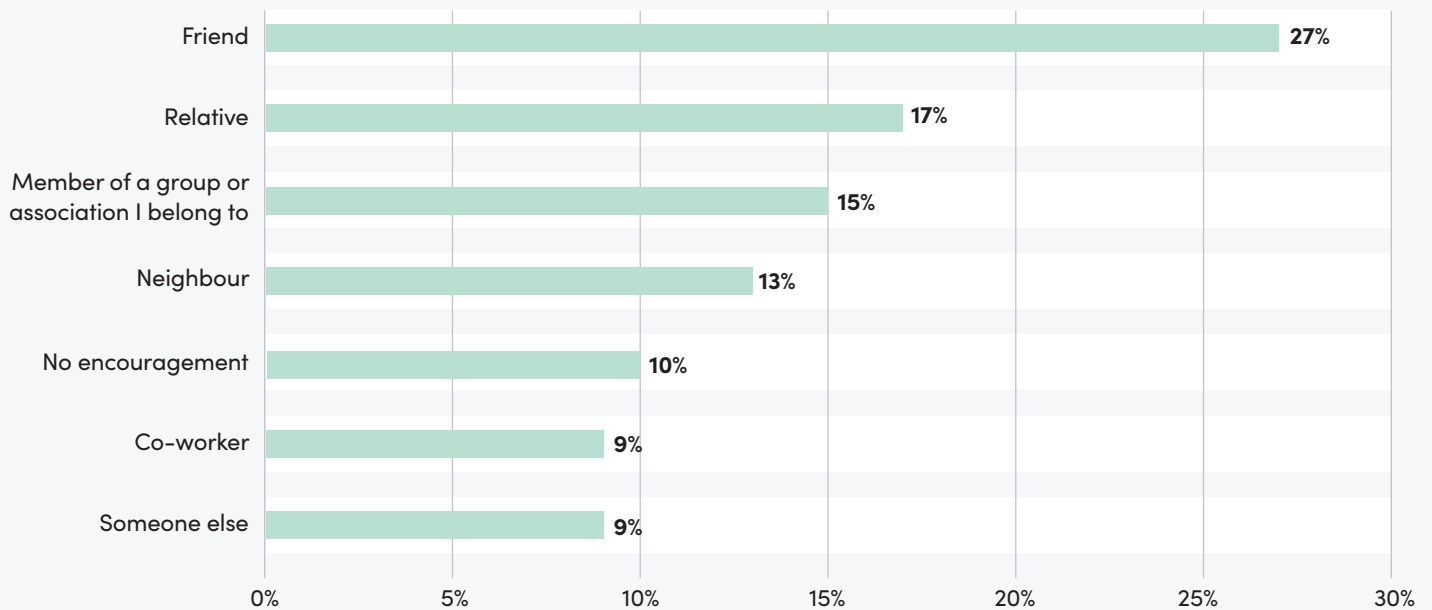
## Motivations for entering local politics



While few cite recruitment as the primary reason they sought public office, most did indeed receive encouragement to run—from friends, family, neighbours, and colleagues. Indeed, most received encouragement from multiple sources. Two-thirds (66%) of respondents were encouraged by friends, family, neighbours, and co-workers. About a third of respondents (30%) were encouraged to run by a colleague in an association or membership organization, again demonstrating the importance of local community involvement in paving the path to politics. Just a small number of those who received encouragement (10%) say they were recruited by politicians.

A slightly larger share of female respondents (83%) said they received encouragement before entering public life, compared with 77% of male politicians.

### Who encouraged local politicians to run





## What is life like at City Hall?

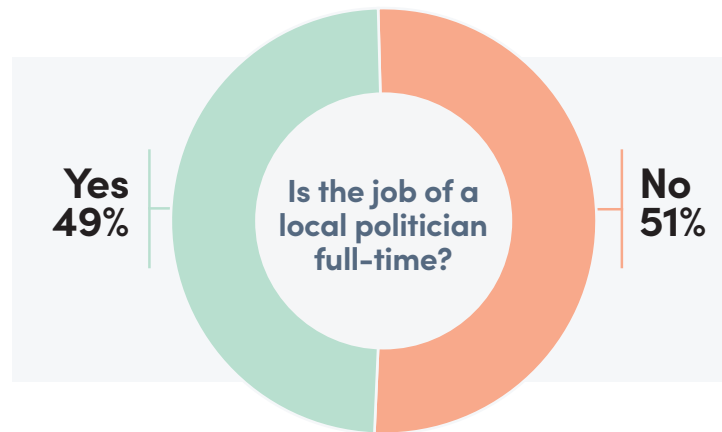
One of the central aims of this survey is to better understand the experience of local politicians as representatives and legislators. How do they spend their time—and how much of it do they have? Do our local leaders have the capacity to represent us in complex deliberations and difficult policy decisions?

### Capacity

The one dimension that makes municipal politics quite distinct from other orders of government is that the job is still often treated as a part-time commitment, rather than a full-time profession. That kind of amateurism once characterized the lives of most Canadian politicians—in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Parliament and the legislatures sat infrequently, and Members could spend large parts of their year in other professional pursuits. But the job of MP or MLA long ago expanded to a full-time occupation and well beyond.

Respondents to the Canadian Municipal Barometer survey, however, are evenly divided about the size and nature of their job. Forty-nine per cent regard their position as part-time. This includes nearly half (47%) of mostly urban politicians, and a majority (62%) of mostly rural politicians.

The result—again, unique in the world of politics—is that local representatives must divide their attention between the work of leading our communities, and



private professional pursuits.

More than three-quarters (77%) of local politicians who consider their role as part-time hold another job at the same time. These tend to be the same jobs representatives held before entering public life. Sixty per cent of respondents with side hustles were employed in management positions, corporate or administrative roles, and other white-collar professions.

### Staff

The work of local representative can also be lonely. In federal, provincial, or territorial politics, legislators are provided a budget for office staff. Those staff often take the lead for much of the constituency service work, and provide research and communications support to Members for their legislative duties. The same is not true for local politicians.

Most local councillors report no staff support. Just 24% of respondents report the capacity of an additional employee in their municipal offices. This varies predictably across different district types; about a third (37%) of mostly urban politicians have staff, versus virtually no rural representatives. When mayors are excluded, 82% of councillors report having no staff.

The staff teams that exist are generally small. Most (57%) of the municipal politicians who have staff have just one full-time employee or less (as in, one part-time staff). Without close direct supports, councillors have to make the most of their time.

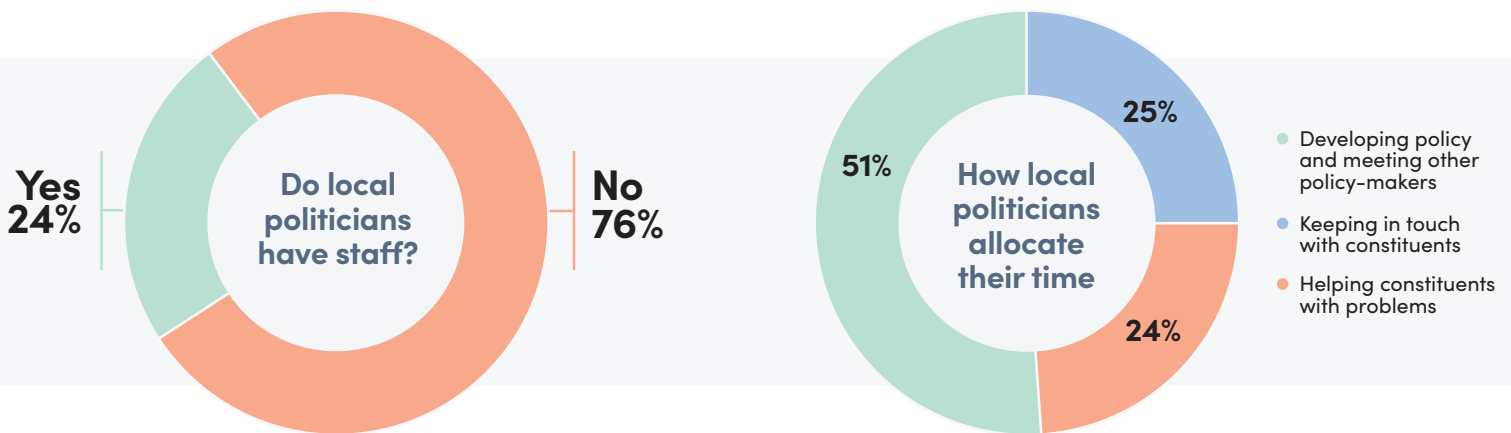
### Hours and workload

There is plenty to do. The survey sought to establish a better understanding of a local politician's workload,

and how they distribute their time between constituents, policy development, and consultation.

Typical municipal politicians spend about half their time helping and consulting with constituents, and the other half developing policy and interacting with council colleagues. While local politicians are sometimes perceived as pothole fillers and glad-handlers, the policy and legislative role is evidently fairly central in their lives and work.

Indeed, they would allocate more time to those tasks if possible. Respondents were presented with a hypothetical: if an event was unexpectedly cancelled later that week and they had two extra hours to play with, what would they do with them? The most commonly selected responses point toward policy-oriented work: reading background materials about an



### How local politicians would use extra time

Read background materials for upcoming council vote re: capital budget	30%
Read staff report re: new economic development policy	18%
Meet with provincial representatives to advocate for infrastructure funds	13%
Meet with local neighbourhood association to discuss petition re: new housing development	12%
Meet with staff to advocate for road upgrades in specific neighbourhood	8%
Meet with constituents re: concerns over property tax bill	8%
Meet with neighbourhood group re: approval for neighbourhood street festival	6%
Meet with local women's group re: upcoming municipal advocacy campaign	5%

upcoming vote (30%) or a staff report on economic development policy (18%), or engaging provincial officials for infrastructure funds (13%).

## Compensation

Compensating politicians is never simple. On the one hand, there is public value in making these jobs appealing, in order to attract a high calibre of candidates. Compensating the work fairly also ensures that anyone can afford to take on the role—rather than treating it like a hobby, so that the job can only be held by those who can afford to spend large portions of their week on unpaid labour.

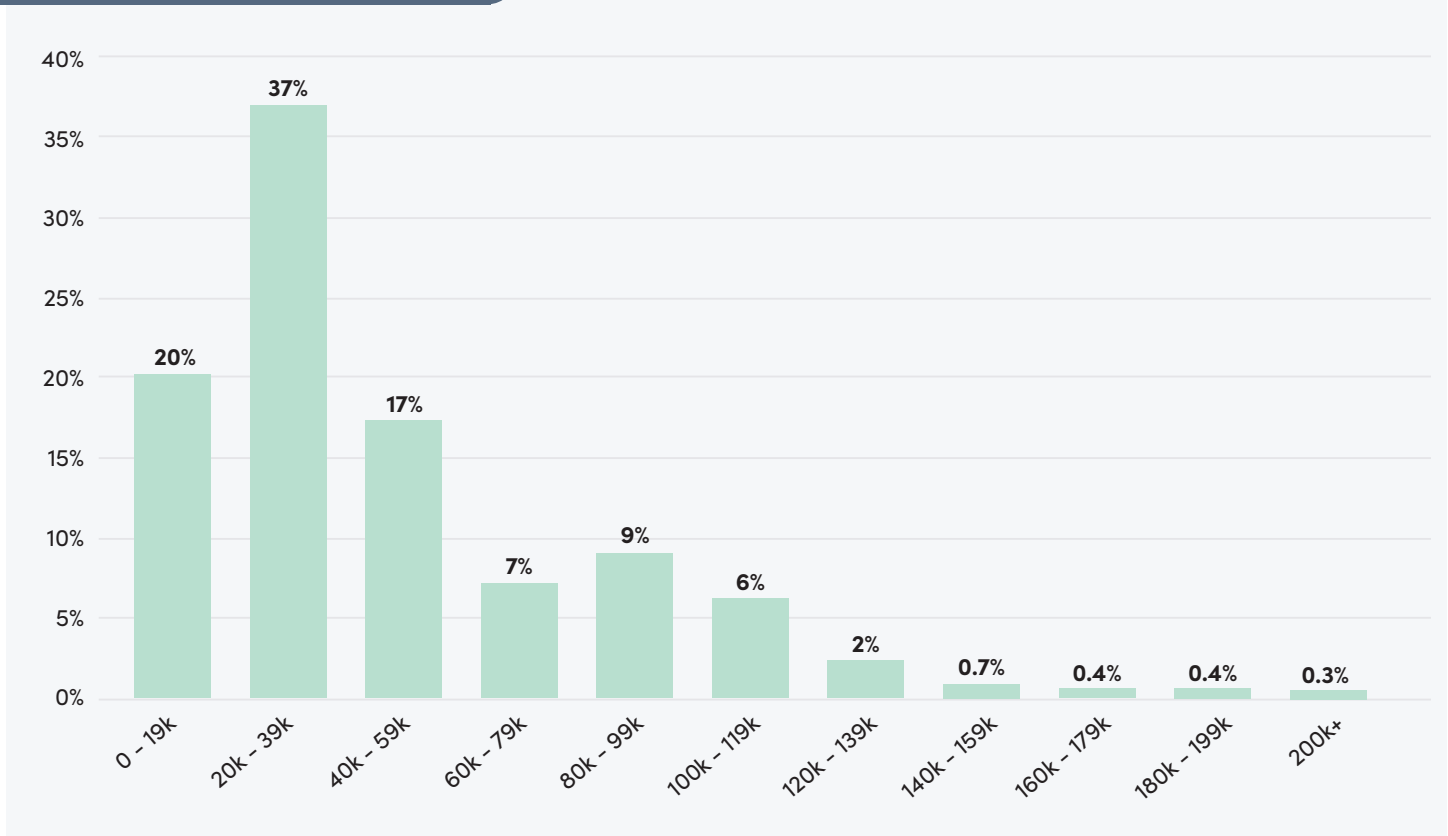
On the other hand, politicians' salaries are public expenditure, albeit usually a very marginal one. And

compensating the jobs too well may result in people being attracted to public life for the wrong reasons.

Given the terrible optics and intrinsic unpopularity of paying politicians, many jurisdictions in Canada have tended toward under-compensation relative to a comparable role in the private sector (to the extent that such a thing exists). Contrary to broad public perceptions, it can be very hard to convince politicians to raise their own salaries.

In any case, the Canadian Municipal Barometer makes clear that entering local political office is by no means a get-rich-quick scheme. Indeed, for the coterie of managers, business owners, and other highly paid white-collar professionals that make up a large share of municipal politicians, entering local politics means

### What local politicians get paid





taking a pay cut.

Over half of local politicians make less than \$40,000 a year, with a plurality (37%) reporting earning between \$20,000 and \$39,000. Most of the higher salaries belong to mayors. More than 80% of councillors who responded to the survey make less than \$60,000.

Full-time politicians make more than their part-time counterparts, logically. Among full-timers, about half (51%) make \$60,000 or less, and 80% make \$100,000 or less.

These figures would suggest that local politicians can earn a decent middle-class salary, particularly if they are full-time in the position. But the financial incentive to enlist in local politics is limited. Indeed, nearly half of respondents (42%) took a pay cut in

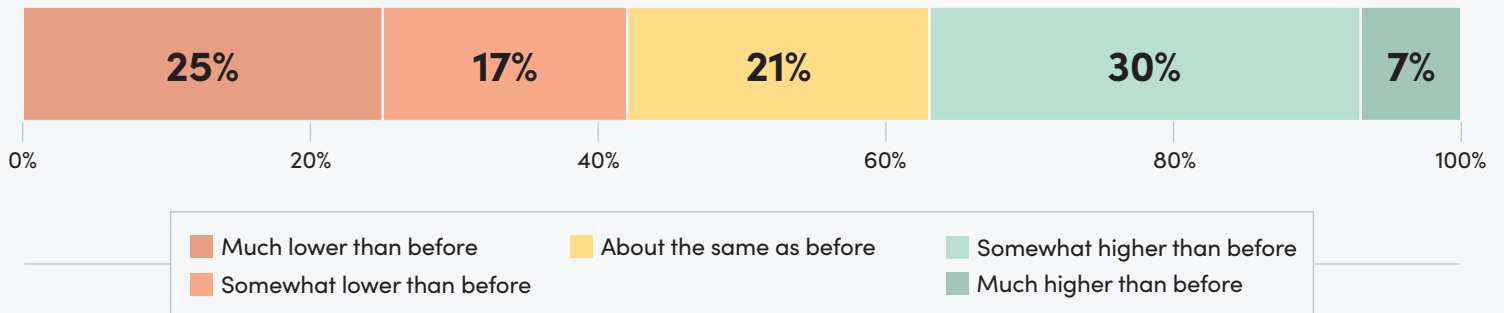
order to serve in public life. A smaller share (37%) say their income is higher now than before they were elected.

The overwhelming majority of respondents (78%) see themselves as either paid about average or underpaid, relative to other municipalities. Very few local politicians believe they are overpaid, perhaps unsurprisingly.

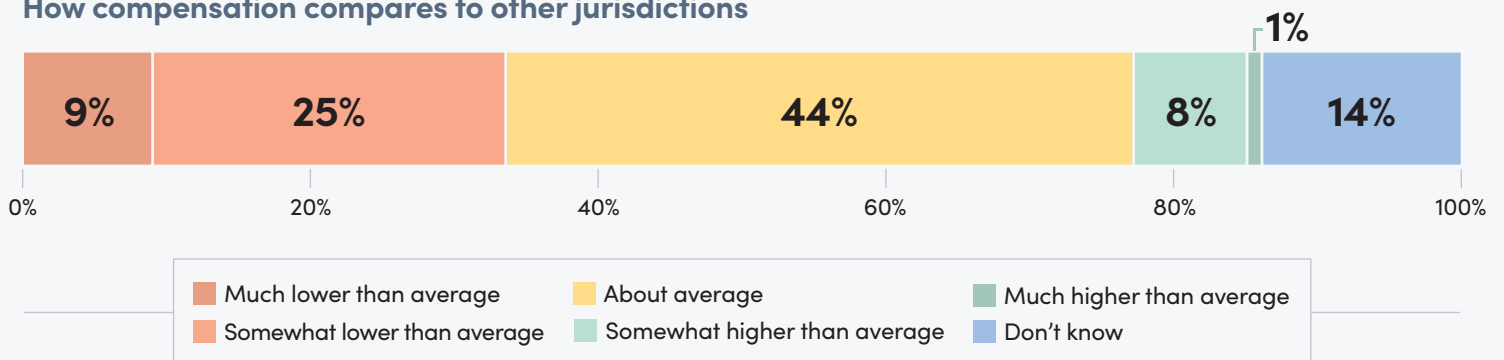
### Vocation or way station?

Many countries have a kind of political talent pipeline, where young and ambitious politicians cut their teeth at the local level, and work their way up toward state and national politics. That trajectory has never been as evident in Canada, but the Canadian Municipal Barometer survey wanted to probe this theme. How invested are

### How income level has changed since becoming elected



### How compensation compares to other jurisdictions



our local leaders in their specific context? Is municipal politics just about earning dues, gaining name recognition, and biding time for a provincial or national run?

The strong answer from most respondents is no.

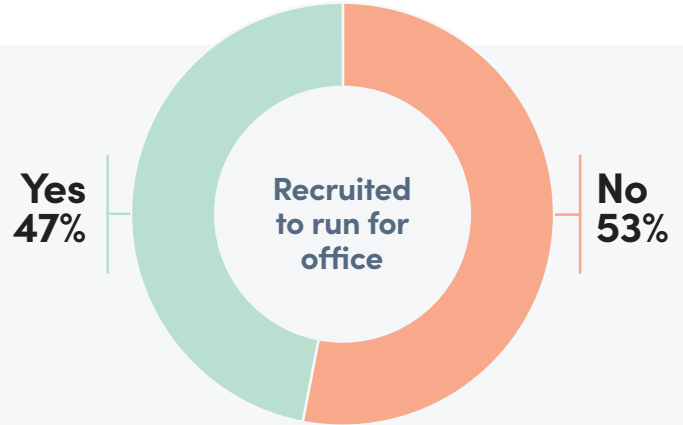
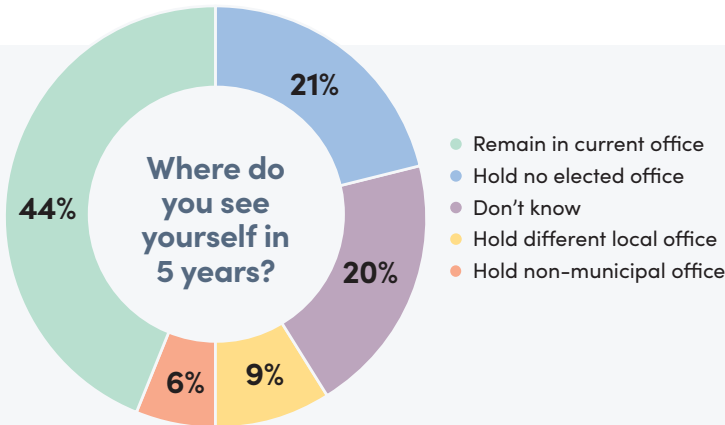
Most local politicians are planning to stick with the job for the longer-term. A majority see themselves continuing in their current position, or in another local position five years from now (maybe the mayoralty is in the crosshairs). Only 6% aspire to holding non-municipal elected office within that time.

(Notably, few worry about getting shown the door by electors sooner than they want to leave. Approximately 80% of those who plan to run again think it is likely for them to be re-elected. Given the “incumbency advantage” in municipal politics—where sitting politicians have a strong electoral advantage—their confidence

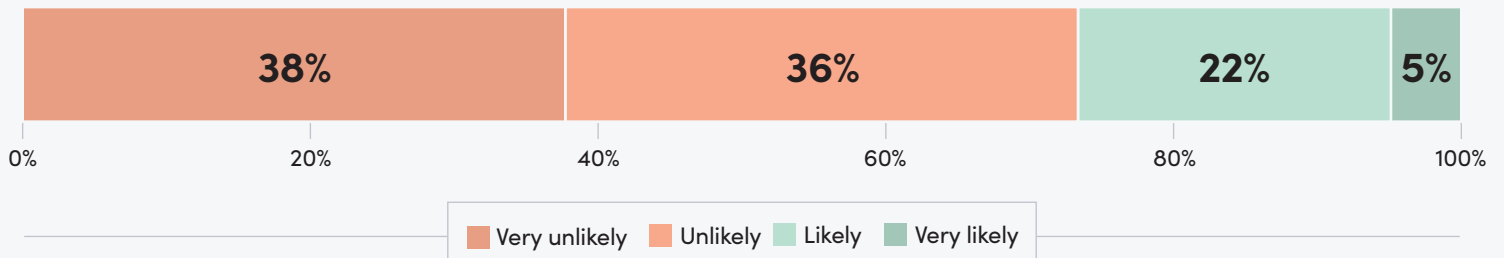
may not be misplaced.)

Interest in trying politics at another level is certainly not non-existent, but it is not the norm. While there are notable examples of politicians who began in local politics before making the jump to provincial or federal politics, few local politicians want to take that path. Almost three-quarters believe it is unlikely they would ever run for provincial or federal office.

Relative to the general public, that remaining quarter of local politicians is still a large share of federal and provincial ambition, certainly. But municipal politicians’ reluctance to pursue higher office is perhaps more surprising given that almost half of them have been recruited, or encouraged to run federally or provincially. Mayors, in particular, are heavily courted (73% have been recruited, compared with 41% of councillors).



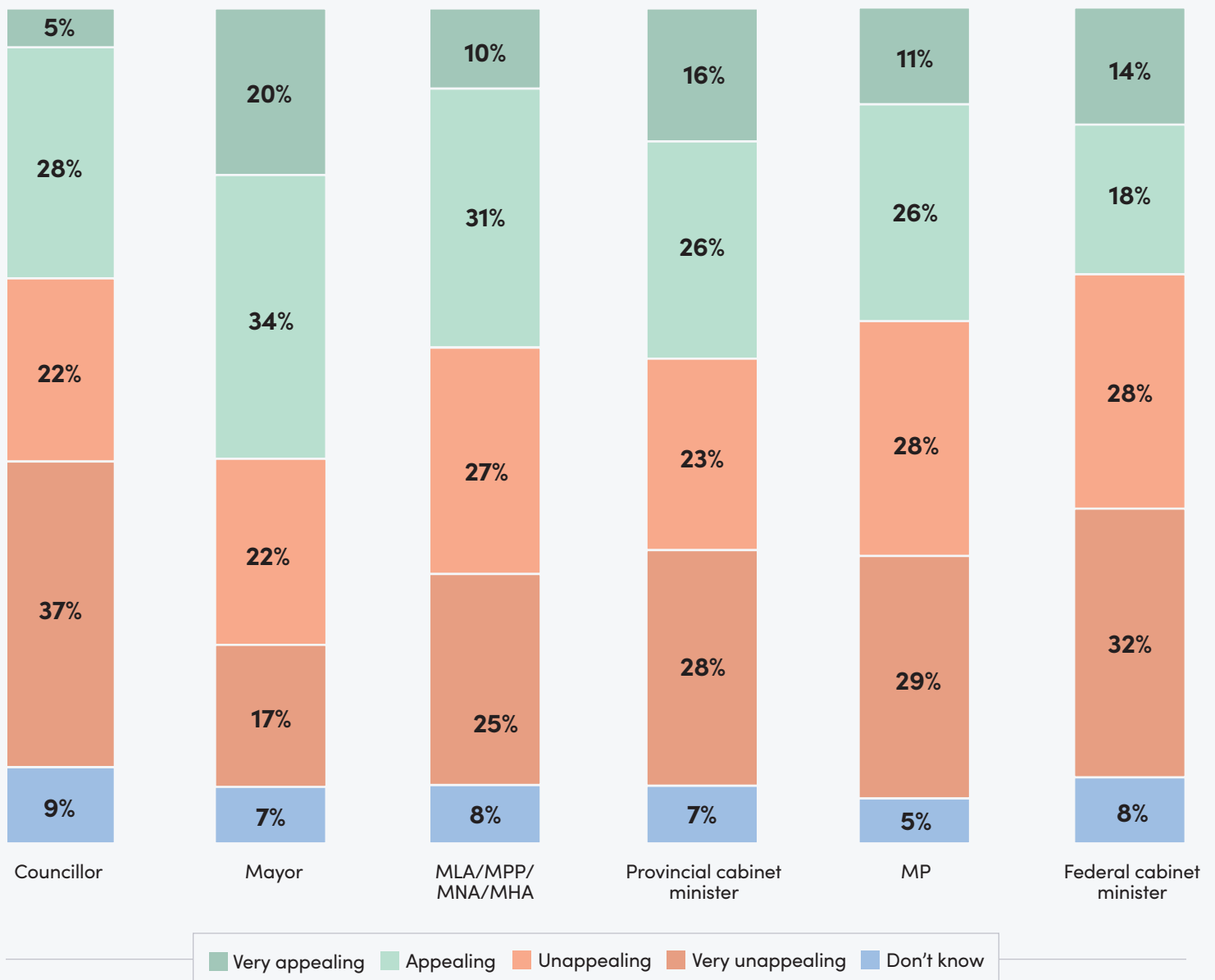
### Interest in running at other levels of elected office



The survey pursued the question of what other office appeals to local politicians. The local comes out on top. Among councillors, the position of mayor is most appealing. Generally, the further a position moves from the local community, the less appealing local politicians find it. Respondents found the idea of provincial office

more appealing than federal office, but on the whole, more respondents still found provincial office less appealing than appealing.

### Appeal of different levels of elected office





## What are the best and worst parts of the job?

If most municipal politicians plan to stay put, what is it that keeps them in the role? The Canadian Municipal Barometer survey created space for politicians

to express, in their own words, what they liked most about the job.

### What keeps them coming back

“What I like best is the intellectual challenge of trying to balance so many divergent interests together with a strong group of council colleagues.”

“Providing a say to what this place will look like when my kids and grandkids will potentially live here.”

“Talking to people.”

“Having the ability to have my mind changed with the introduction of information I had not previously been exposed to.”

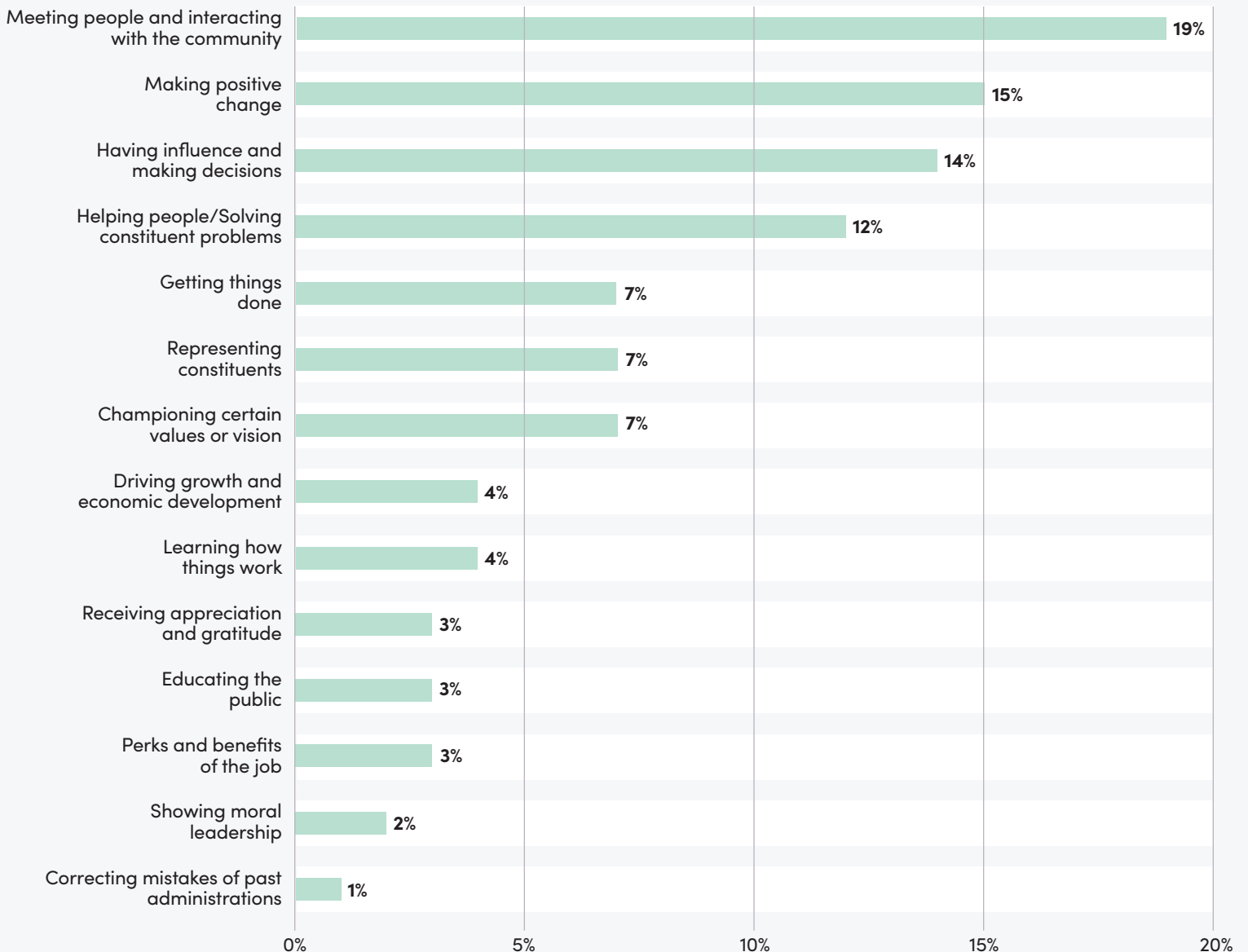
“I can set the tone for how we conduct ourselves at council meetings and in all council business.”

Municipal politicians say they ran for office because of their commitment to their communities and their desire to make change, and their favourite parts of the job have a relationship to these altruistic motivations. One of the most attractive features of being a mayor or councillor is the ability to engage with and participate in one's community. The second cluster of popular themes relate to the desire to make decisions and advance change. A third cluster of responses concern

aspects of representation and advocacy on behalf of constituents or specific issues.

But the job brings significant costs, too. When local leaders describe their least favourite parts of the job, they are fairly consistent. Chief among the complaints is the nastiness and negativity that comes with occupying elected office. Local politicians feel they become lightning rods or whipping boys, attracting blame and criticism for things they feel are well beyond their control.

### Best part of the job

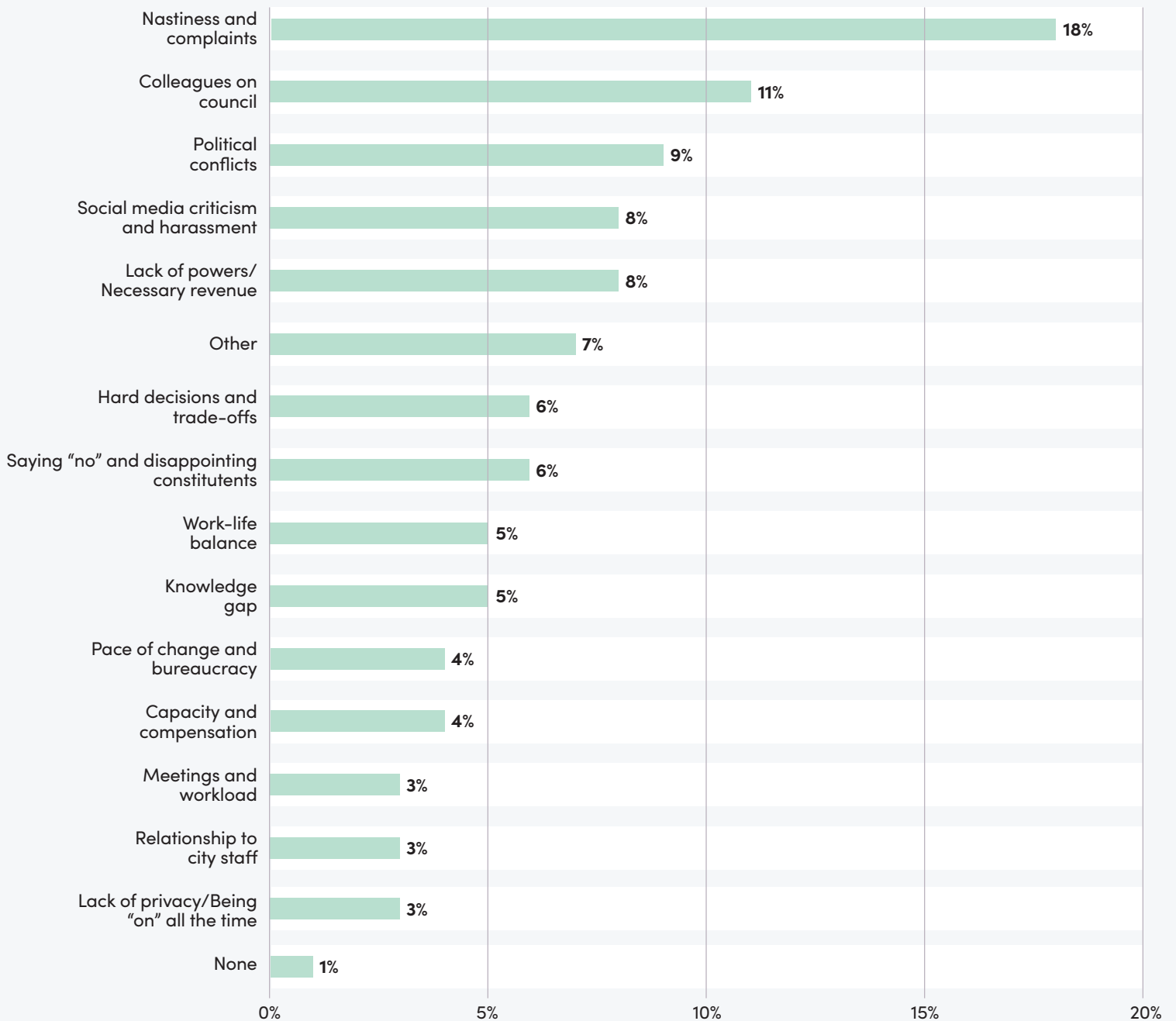


Note: Coded, open-ended responses

Mayors and councillors overwhelmingly described the nastiness and complaints they faced as the worst part of the job. Social media criticism and harassment, in particular, is itself the fourth-most commonly invoked challenge.

The second-most common theme in complaints concerns colleagues on council—referring to council dysfunction, bullying, and clashes of interests and values, and difficult interpersonal scenarios. A general lament about “the politics” getting in the way is also common.

## Worst part of the job



Note: Coded, open-ended responses

## The councillor's lament(s)

"Perception that politicians are crooked and/or lazy and/or taxing people to death for fun. Sure makes the job harder."

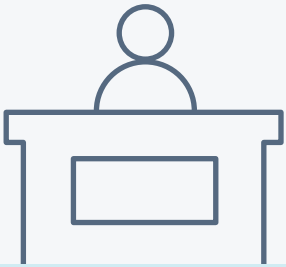
"Uninformed, immature, and uncensored social media comments from some residents about our council decisions."

"As a woman, I have been subject to some bullying. It has taken a strong resolve to overcome it."

"Dealing with amoral, self-interested ladder-climbers who know little and care less...."

"You can only please half the people half of the time."

"When you can't help."



## Conclusion: What should local representation be?

It's difficult to draw a straightforward picture of municipal political life. There are vast differences in size, scope, and capacity among Canada's municipalities, and these differences imprint on the diverse experiences of Canada's mayors and councillors. The job falls somewhere along a wide spectrum, from amateur part-time pursuit, to professional politics.

It's worthwhile to ask what Canadians expect from their local representative, and to what extent our municipal leaders are resourced to meet those expect-

tations. The business of governance is complex, and representation is hard. Few districts are homogenous, which means high-quality representation is not about simply being of a community, but rather about knowing how to deliberate with and on behalf of diverse citizens.

This requires time and help. Clearly, there is no single model for healthy democratic representation at the municipal level; our municipalities are too different from one another. But councils should not be afraid to

fairly examine questions like whether to allocate more for staff support, convert part-time jobs to full-time jobs where appropriate, or even provide better compensation to local politicians. Under-resourcing the people who watch how our municipalities spend our money, and set the terms for the future development of our communities, is a false economy.

Community leaders should also pay special attention to who is being invited, implicitly or explicitly, into local public life. Various forms of underrepresentation, for example of people of colour and women, are often even more pernicious and pronounced at the local level than federally and provincially. The Canadian Municipal Barometer survey also found that represen-

tatives were concentrated in white-collar professions, with large sectors of the economy largely unrepresented.

The survey reveals that more than an explicitly political path—say, participating in a political party, time as a school board trustee, or recruitment from existing politicians—many local leaders came via civil society organizations. Attracting a diverse and talented slate of local politicians, who are broadly reflected of the communities they seek to represent, may mean starting hyper-local—with more active recruitment within neighbourhood associations and service clubs, and ensuring equitable access to political power for community groups throughout a community.



### **Canadian Municipal Barometer: What's next**

In early 2021, the Canadian Municipal Barometer is returning to mayors and councillors across Canada—this time to explore local participation and citizen engagement in their communities.





## Methodology

The data analyzed in this report was taken from the Canadian Municipal Barometer, an annual survey of elected municipal officials in every Canadian municipality with a population greater than 9,000. The survey is administered by a pan-Canadian partnership of academic and non-academic institutions, led by Jack Lucas of the University of Calgary.

The survey was conducted online in English or

French. Invitations to complete the 2020 Canadian Municipal Barometer survey were distributed by email on January 6, 2020, and the survey closed on February 28, 2020. A total of 841 individuals completed the survey questions examined in this report, with at least one respondent from 85% of the municipalities included in the survey.

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The Samara Centre for Democracy is a non-partisan charity dedicated to strengthening Canada's democracy, making it more accessible, responsive, and inclusive. The Samara Centre produces action-based research—as well as tools and resources for active citizens and public leaders—designed to engage Canadians in their democracy.

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