

Black on the Ballot

What Black Canadians Told Us About Running for and Serving in Elected Office



**Black Canadians
in Electoral Politics**





Black Canadians in Electoral Politics

Through the first-ever national survey of Black Canadians in politics, archival research, and interviews with Black candidates and legislators, this project is producing the most comprehensive account of Black Canadians' participation and inclusion in Canadian politics. This work is informing the development of evidence-based tools to increase diversity in politics, as well as a podcast and educational resources that will tell the stories of Black Canadians in electoral politics.

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This study was led by Dr. Erin Tolley at Carleton University in partnership with Operation Black Vote Canada.



Operation Black Vote Canada

Operation Black Vote Canada (OBVC) is a grassroots, non-profit organization that educates and advocates for Black Canadians' engagement in politics. Since its inception in 2004, OBVC has educated, motivated, and advocated for Black Canadians' participation in Canada's government, agencies, boards, commissions, civil service and political processes at all levels. This work has included training more than 100 Black Canadians for public office. Black Canadians in Electoral Politics builds on this foundation with the aim of increasing the evidence base and creating additional resources to increase the number of Black Canadians in politics.

Black on the Ballot Podcast



Listen to our companion podcast [on our website](#).

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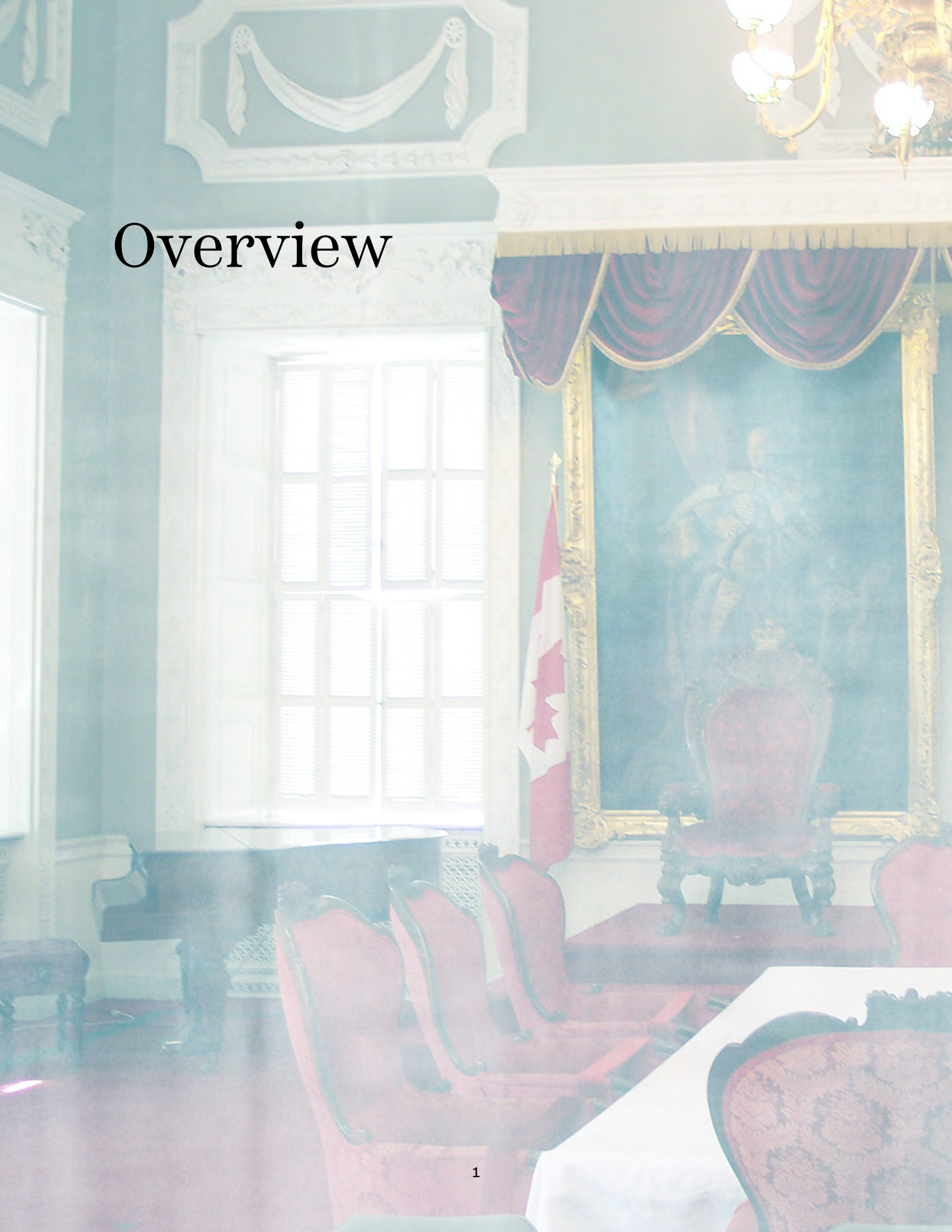
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Overview



Executive Summary

Black Canadians have been running for and serving in elected office for more than 150 years. However, until now, there has not been a comprehensive account of their experiences. This report helps to remedy that gap. Through archival research, a national survey, and in-depth interviews with past and current Black Canadian politicians, *Black on the Ballot* provides a first-hand perspective on running for and serving in elected office as a Black Canadian. This groundbreaking research sheds new light on the backgrounds of Black Canadian candidates and officeholders, their motivations for running, the challenges they face and how they navigate them, and the intersection between Blackness and other identities.

Through archival research, a national survey, and in-depth interviews with past and current Black Canadian politicians, this report provides a first-hand perspective on running for and serving in elected office as a Black Canadian.

The report's key findings include:

- Most Black Canadians run for office at the local level; fewer run provincially or federally.
- There is little evidence of a gender gap in Black Canadian candidacy: Black women and Black men are almost equally likely to seek elected office.
- Patterns of candidate emergence are gendered: Black women are less likely than Black men to consider running for office unless someone has suggested that they do so.
- Most Black Canadians in politics are first- or second-generation Canadians. They have high levels of education and tend to enter elected office from careers in business, government and politics, and law.

- Black Canadian candidates and officeholders have strong ties to Black communities and a strong sense of Black identity; however, most respondents say that political success requires the cultivation of diverse networks and working across communities.
- A lack of financial resources and a shortage of volunteers are key barriers to political success.
- The majority of Black Canadians report experiencing discrimination while running for or serving in office, including from members of the public, other politicians, legislative and municipal staff, and in the media.
- Despite the challenges, a wide majority of Black Canadians say they would run for office again.

The report concludes with several recommendations, which include:

- Encourage Black Canadians to run for office; this support is a key catalyst for electoral engagement.
- Ensure guidelines on the process for becoming a candidate and elected official are transparent, clear, and accessible.
- Across the political party spectrum, adopt multi-pronged recruitment strategies to diversify candidate slates.
- Provide accessible candidate training, especially at the local level where sustained funding support for such programs is more precarious.
- Support the collection of racially disaggregated data on candidacies and officeholding in Canadian politics so that outcomes can be measured and gaps can be remedied.
- Address low voter turnout; election administration agencies have a key role to play and should consider culturally appropriate messaging about voter eligibility, access to polling stations, and the importance of political participation.
- Train political reporters to cover Black candidates and communities; encourage the hiring of more Black journalists and journalists with experience covering Black communities.

- Focus on inclusion in politics, not just representation. Address hostile political spaces and adopt inclusive workplace policies or codes of conduct to reduce racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination.
- Share stories of Black success in politics, which can motivate and encourage other Black Canadians to seek office.

Black Canadians' participation in public life positively impacts the communities that elect them, as well as policy and representation more broadly. When a wider range of voices, ideas, and experiences are included in the political arena, better decision-making and more effective policies can be achieved. This report provides an evidence-based roadmap to increase the number of Black Canadians in politics and create more inclusive elected institutions. When Black Canadians run for and serve in elected office, we all win.

When a wider range of voices, ideas, and experiences are included in the political arena, better decision-making and more effective policies can be achieved.

Preface

As we celebrate the 20th anniversary of Operation Black Vote Canada (OBVC), we take this opportunity to look back on two decades of Black communities' engagement in Canadian electoral politics. Founded with a vision to increase Black political participation and ensure the voices of Black Canadians are heard, OBVC has worked tirelessly to support, mobilize, and empower Black voters and those who run for public office. This report represents a crucial moment in that journey: a moment to reflect on our experiences, both the successes and the struggles, as we examine how Black Canadians have shaped, and been shaped by, the political landscape.

Over the past 20 years, our communities have witnessed significant shifts in political engagement. From encouraging increased voter turnout to pushing for policy changes that reflect Black Canadians' needs, the road has been both promising and challenging. This research captures the full breadth of our political experiences—the good, the bad, and the ugly. By analyzing trends, barriers, and breakthroughs in our political participation, the report provides valuable insights that can help political parties, the media, and all those involved in shaping the future of Canadian politics better understand the needs of Black communities and those who run for public office.

Our hope is that this reflection will not only highlight the progress we have made but also shed light on the persistent obstacles that remain. From systemic inequities to the underrepresentation of Black voices in political offices, the path forward requires our collective effort and understanding. As we move into the next phase of our work, OBVC remains committed to creating lasting change and advocating for policies that promote equity, inclusion, and representation for Black Canadians.

This report is not only a snapshot of where we've been, but a call to action for where we still need to go. It is a reminder that the political engagement of Black

Canadians is not just a momentary trend or a check on diversity, but a vital force in shaping the future of our country so that it represents the lived experience of everyone. Together, let's continue to make all our voices heard, amplify our concerns, and create a more inclusive political environment for generations to come.

A special thank you to Dr. Erin Tolley and Carleton University for their invaluable partnership in this endeavour. Their collaboration and support have been instrumental in making this research possible. We also extend our heartfelt gratitude to all the Black Canadians who have run for and served in office and especially those who gave their time to participate in the survey and interviews that form the basis for this research.

Here is to 20 more years of continuing to work towards a more representative and inclusive political system.



Velma Morgan

Chair, Operation Black Vote Canada

Introduction

In February 2024, the Honourable Greg Fergus, the first Black parliamentarian to serve as Speaker of the House of Commons, hosted a book launch for *Black Activist, Black Scientist, Black Icon*, the autobiography of the late Dr. Howard McCurdy, the first Black New Democrat to be elected as a Member of Parliament in Canada. In his remarks at the launch, New Democratic MP Matthew Green observed that there is now more Black representation in federal politics than ever before. He invited Black Senators and MPs to join him at the front. The scene was striking: a symbol of progress, as well as a reminder of the pathway that it took to get there.

Some of the earliest recorded Black politicians in Canada include Abraham Doras Shadd, a shoemaker, abolitionist, and civil rights activist who emigrated to southwestern Ontario from Delaware and was elected to Raleigh town council in 1859. Wilson Ruffin Abbott, an American-born businessman and son of a Scottish-Irish father and free West African mother, meanwhile, was active in Toronto local politics in the late 1840s and 50s.¹ Virnetta Anderson is recognized as the first Black woman elected to a municipal council in Canada (Smith 2019); she served on Calgary council from 1974 to 1977. The first Black mayors in Canada were Dr. Firmin Monestime, elected to the helm in Mattawa, Ontario in 1964, and Daurene Lewis, elected mayor of Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia in 1984. In 1963, Leonard Braithwaite became the first Black Canadian elected to a provincial legislature; he served as an Ontario MPP until 1975. Rosemary Brown was the first Black woman elected to a provincial legislature; she did so in 1972. Federally, Lincoln Alexander was the first Black man to be selected as a Member of Parliament; he came to the House of Commons in 1968. In 1993, Jean Augustine became the first Black woman MP.

What can we take from these historical milestones? On the one hand, they demonstrate the political successes and resilience of Black Canadians. They have aspired to—and achieved—some of the highest political offices in the country.

On the other hand, while Black Canadians have had a presence in politics since the mid-1800s, many Canadians are not aware of their contributions. Their achievements are often overlooked, invisibilized, or erased. As Dr. George Elliott Clarke puts it, “Canadians do a lousy job of remembering Black Canadians.”²

Telling these stories—the stories of Black Canadians who have run for and served in office—is a central objective of this project. Alongside this goal, we want to identify the challenges and opportunities that Black Canadians encounter in politics. In what follows, we chart their political pathways, highlighting sources of encouragement and discouragement, their future aspirations, and the advice they would give to those considering careers in politics. On this basis, we advance several recommendations to increase the presence and inclusion of Black Canadians in politics.

If you’d like to learn more about the experiences of Black Canadians in politics, you can tune into our companion podcast, [Black on the Ballot](#), available to stream on all the major platforms. The podcast will introduce you to Black Canadians who have run for office. Guests share, in their own words, stories about their motivations, triumphs, and unfinished business. These experiences are woven together with research from this project. Together, the report and podcast provide a foundation for more diverse and inclusive politics.



Companion podcast
[Black on the Ballot](#)

A photograph of a person's hands typing on a Dell laptop keyboard. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent green filter. The laptop screen is visible in the upper portion, showing some text. The Dell logo is visible on the bezel below the screen. The hands are positioned over the keyboard, with fingers resting on the keys.

Research Approach & Methods

Research Approach & Methods

Research for this project was carried out in three phases: digital and archival research, survey, and interviews.



Digital and archival research

There is no comprehensive source of information on Black Canadians in politics, so the first step in this project was to identify Black Canadians who had run for or served. We used a variety of methods and cast the net wide, looking at all levels of elected office, from the school board to local councils to provincial and federal legislatures.

Our search began with a working list of Black candidates and officeholders that Operation Black Vote Canada had compiled for recent elections in some jurisdictions. We built on this foundation using a variety of strategies, including archival analysis of federal and provincial legislative websites, media searches, and analysis of recent election results and candidate lists. We wrote an op-ed promoting the research project, which was published in the Ottawa Citizen and La Presse, and we made a call-out for participants on social media. Our website included a form inviting Black Canadians who had run for or served in office

to identify themselves so we could include them in the research. We aimed to capture anyone who self-identified as Black or a member of the African diaspora (including African Canadians, African Nova Scotians, and Afro-Caribbeans).³ We also included candidates and officeholders identified by the media, in historical records, or through community knowledge as Black or a member of the African diaspora. We focused primarily on the previous two decades, but also captured historical milestones, which we document on our website.⁴

Our efforts helped us identify more than 380 Black Canadian candidates and officeholders who have run for office in recent decades.⁵ Of these, 14% had run at the school board level, 32% municipally, 33% provincially, and 20% federally. Although this is, to our knowledge, the most complete list of Black Canadian candidates and officeholders ever compiled, it is by no means complete. Historical electoral records, especially at the school board and municipal level in smaller centres are ephemeral and often hard to access. None of these records include demographic information about candidates.

Our efforts helped us identify more than 380 Black Canadian candidates and officeholders who have run for office in recent decades.

The decline of local news capacity means that most media coverage focuses on party leaders or mayors, most of whom are not Black, and local candidates rarely receive much attention. There is no doubt we have missed some candidates. We consider the database a living document and continue to add to it; if you are, or know of, a Black Canadian candidate or officeholder who should be included, please reach out and let us know.⁶



Survey

Next, in January 2023, we launched the first-ever national survey of Black Canadians in politics.⁷ We distributed the survey to anyone in our database for whom we could find working email addresses, which we collected through internet research and reach-out via direct messages on Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. The survey could be completed in either English or French; responses were confidential with no identifying information included in any of the reporting.

The distribution list included 212 potential respondents, and we followed up with respondents several times to encourage participation. When the survey closed in June 2023, we had received 95 completed submissions for a response rate of 45%, which is slightly above average for this type of research design.⁸ We suspect that some email addresses, while functional, were tied to the candidate's electoral campaign and not regularly checked because approximately 37% of our emails attempting contact were never opened. This challenge is one that plagues research with political elites and should be considered when interpreting results.



212 invitations
to participate
in the survey



95 surveys
completed

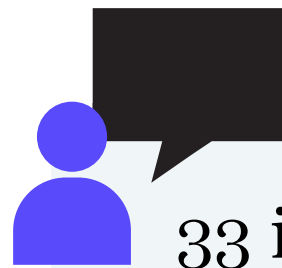
The survey asked respondents about their electoral experience, including the number of times and levels of government at which they had run, their motivations for running for office, sources of encouragement and discouragement, challenges, and future aspirations. There were also questions on demographics, identity, and connections to community.⁹ In this report, we analyze the data using descriptive statistical techniques. Where possible, we provide bivariate tabulations to illustrate differences across levels of government or between populations (e.g., to compare Black men and Black women), but in many cases, the number of respondents in each cell is too small to permit these more fine-grained analyses.



Interviews

Finally, we completed 33 in-depth interviews with Black Canadians who have run for and served in politics; participants included trailblazers and more recent entrants.¹⁰ Interviews were conducted in 2023 and 2024; most took place virtually although two occurred in person. Interviews averaged about one hour in duration. The interviews were semi-structured and guided by a standard questionnaire.¹¹ The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and key themes were inductively coded using Dedoose. The summary of themes included in this report is not exhaustive; rather, we focus on dominant themes and highlight areas where there is some consensus among participants, as well as sources of divergence.

Although some participants consented to having their names included in the reporting of the results, others asked that their identities be concealed. Because the disclosure of some participants' names could help readers deduce the identities of those who wish to remain anonymous, we have opted to redact names and identifying information for all participants.



**33 in-depth
interviews**

**Interviews averaged
1 hour in duration**

Survey Results

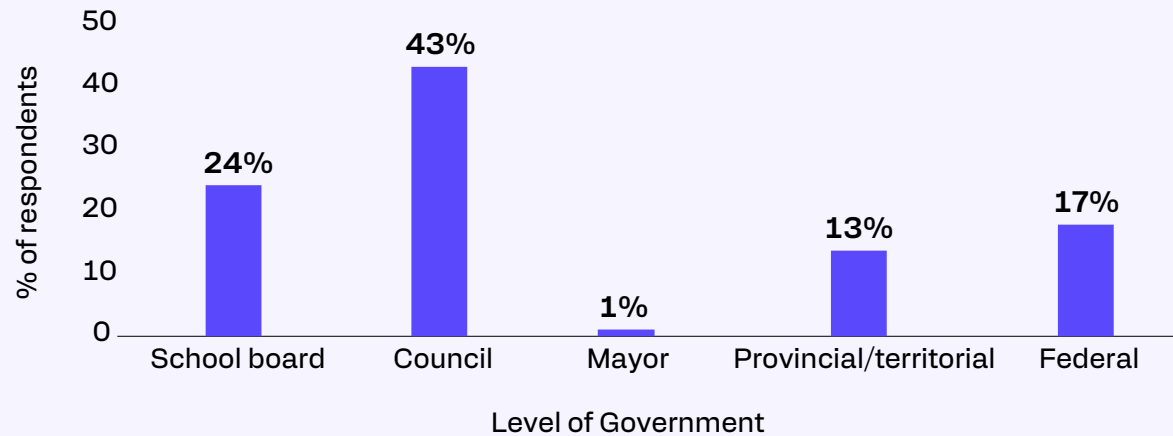
Survey Results

Who Runs?

Survey respondents were asked several questions about their electoral experiences, including which levels of office they had run for and how many times they had run before being elected. More than half of survey respondents had run for positions as local or regional councillors (52%) and almost one-quarter for school board (23%); 6% had run for mayor, 19% provincially, and 21% federally.¹² The concentration of Black candidates at the local level is notable. Some plausible explanations include less costly campaigns, lower barriers to entry, the absence of gatekeeping by political parties, and a view of local politics as a stepping stone to other elected offices.¹³

As is shown in Figure 1, most candidates who responded to the survey made their first attempt to enter electoral politics at the local level, including 43% who first ran as local or regional councillors, 24% who first ran for school trustee, and 1% who first ran for mayor.

FIGURE 1
First Election Attempt, by level of government



Question: “At which level of government did you first run for elected office?”



60% of survey respondents had run for office in the past year.

Meanwhile, 18% first ran for federal office and 14% first ran for provincial or territorial office. Most respondents had run at a single level of government: just 13% of respondents had run for two levels of government, and just 4% for three levels of government. More than half of respondents (55%) had run for office once, while 17% had run twice, 14% three times, 7% four times, and 7% five or more times in total.

Most respondents (60%) had run in the past year, while 24% had run in the last 1-5 years. A smaller portion ran between 6-10 years ago (6%) or 10-15 years ago (6%). Fewer ran in the last 16-20 years (2%) or more than 20 years ago (1%).

Overall, 45% of candidates who responded to the survey had been elected to public office at some point. Of those who had been elected, 16% were elected at the school board level, 58% at the municipal level, 14% at the provincial level, and 12% federally. Most successful candidates were elected on their first attempt (69%), 17% on their second attempt, 9% on their third, and 6% after five or more attempts.

More than one-third (36%) of respondents ran for a political party at the provincial or federal level.¹⁴ Nearly half of respondents who ran for a federal or provincial political party ran for the Liberal Party (47%), more than one-quarter ran for the New Democratic Party (26%), followed by the Conservative Party (12%), Green Party (12%), and Bloc Québécois or Parti Québécois (3%).¹⁵

Respondents are almost evenly distributed by gender, with 52% identifying as women and 48% as men; no survey respondents identified as another gender. The gender distribution of respondents closely reflects the gender distribution of the Black Canadian population; in 2021, Statistics Canada reported that the population of Black Canadians was 51% women and 49% men.¹⁶ It also reflects the general distribution of Black candidates identified in our archival research.¹⁷ It is notable that although women, in general, tend to be under-represented in politics, Black women slightly outnumber Black men and thus appear to buck this trend.¹⁸

Most survey respondents (41%) first ran for office between the ages of 40 and 49; 23% ran for the first time in their 30s, while 19% did so in their 20s. A smaller proportion, 15%, first ran for office between the ages of 50 and 59. Very few respondents—just 1%—were in their 60s or older when they made their first run for office. Most respondents who were successfully elected achieved that milestone in their 40s (49%). Another 21% were elected in their 50s, while 16% were elected in their 30s. Only 7% of candidates were elected in their 20s, and a small fraction were elected either under age 20, in their 60s, or in their 70s, each respectively at 2%. This skew toward middle-aged candidates and representatives is consistent with other research.¹⁹

52% of survey respondents identified as women and 48% identified as men.

The first time they ran for office, 58% of respondents were married or cohabiting, 37% were single, and 5% were divorced. More than half of first-time candidates (59%) had children living at home at that time, while 41% did not.

Among the 43 respondents who had run and been elected, 58% were married or cohabiting at the time of their first election; 30% were single, and 12% were divorced. Rates of marriage between first-time candidates and elected representatives are roughly the same; those who achieve election are somewhat more likely to be divorced than first-time candidates, which could partially reflect life events, including the older age at which election tends to occur. Among respondents who were elected, 58% had children living at home, while 42% did not.

Two-fifths (40%) of respondents have a graduate or professional degree, and over half (56%) have a college or university degree. Before entering politics, almost one-quarter (23%) of respondents had previously worked in business, followed by government and politics at 16%. The legal profession represents 14% of respondents' backgrounds, while the education sector represents 8%, followed by healthcare at 5%. More than one-third of respondents (34%) worked in other fields (e.g., non-profit, trades, student) prior to entering politics. Although the occupational backgrounds of Black candidates, especially in law, education and healthcare, roughly mirror those of candidates, in general, Black Canadian candidates are more likely to have had careers in government and politics than other candidates.²⁰ This finding suggests that Black candidates are more likely than others to enter politics from adjacent professions in the civil service or as political staff.

Almost two-thirds (61%) of respondents were not born in Canada, while 39% were. Most respondents were first- or second-generation Canadians; 89% of respondents said that neither parent was born in Canada. A small number (3%) reported that both parents were born in Canada, while 8% reported that one parent was born in Canada. When asked about their Black identity, 62% identified as Caribbean, 19% as West African, 17% as Black Canadian, 7% as East African and 6% as African American. None identified as Latin American and 11% identified with another Black identity.

Why Run?

Motivations

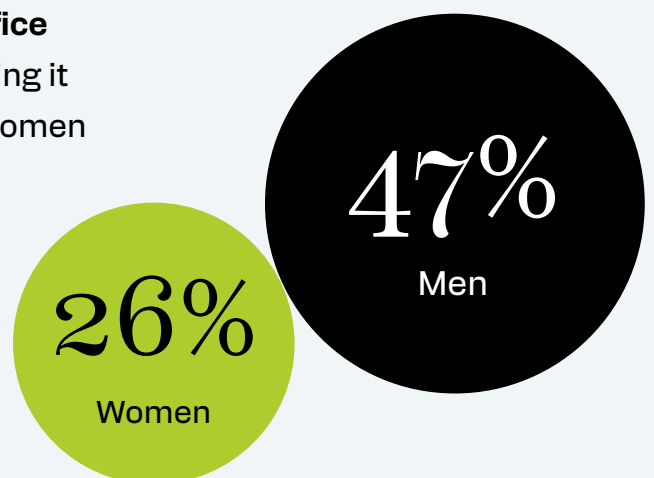
All respondents were asked about their primary motivation for running for office. More than half of respondents (54%) said that they ran to represent communities without a voice; 13% were asked by a party or official to run, while 10% sought a new challenge and another 10% wanted to change how government works. A smaller number of respondents were driven by dissatisfaction with the incumbent (4%) or specific policy issues (4%); 6% cited other reasons.

Respondents were also asked whether the decision to run was entirely their own idea, something they had already thought about when someone else suggested it, or something they had never seriously considered until someone else suggested it. Forty percent of respondents had not seriously thought about running until someone else suggested it, while 37% said that running for office was entirely their own idea; 23% had already considered running when someone else suggested it. In other words, the idea of running was suggested to 63% of respondents.

Gender differences in candidate emergence

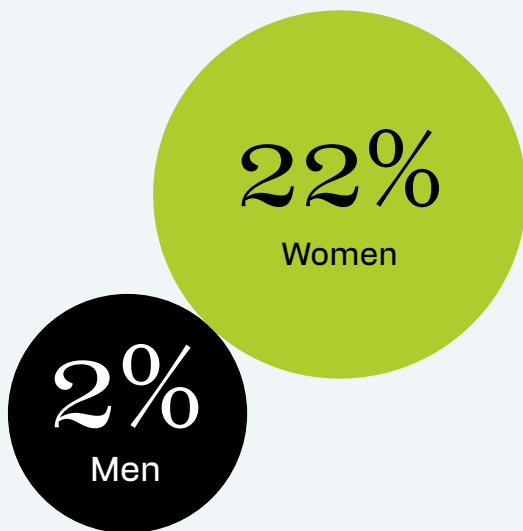
Men were **more likely to say they ran for office entirely of their own accord**, with 47% stating it was their idea alone, compared to 26% of women who said the same.

Half of women respondents (51%) reported that they had not seriously considered running until someone else suggested it, a scenario that applied to just 28% of men.



Among those respondents who said someone had suggested they run, friends, co-workers or acquaintances were the most common source of suggestion (43%), followed by a leader or official from their political party (38%). Other sources of suggestion included an elected or appointed officeholder other than the incumbent (28%), a member of an organization in which they were active other than their political party (20%), family members (13%), and spouses or partners (12%). Suggestions from the incumbent candidate in the district (8%) and union officials (2%) were the least frequent.

Of those who reported receiving the suggestion to run from more than one source, a leader or official from their political party was identified as the most influential source of suggestion (34%), followed by officeholders other than incumbents (17%), and spouses or partners (14%). Family members were the most influential source of suggestion for 14% of respondents, followed by friends, co-workers, or acquaintances (10%), and members of an organization they were active in (7%); 4% indicated another source as their most influential motivator.



Motivations and encouragement

Women were more likely than men to say they ran because a party or official asked them, with 22% of women citing this reason compared to only 2% of men who noted the same.

Men, however, were more likely than women to say that they received support to run from their spouse or partner.

Men were also more likely than women to be encouraged to run by friends, co-workers, and acquaintances (58% compared to 33%). In contrast, parties seem much more likely to reach out to women than men: 52% of women said a party suggested they run, compared to just 16% of men.

Considerations before running

Respondents were shown a list of factors that may have influenced their decision to run for office and could select up to four that affected their decision. The majority, 73%, said they ran because they felt it was important for people like them to have a strong voice in government, while 52% said they considered the ability to address a policy issue if elected. Almost half (47%) of respondents indicated that having a job that allowed them the time and flexibility to run was a consideration, while 29% considered spousal or partner approval to run.

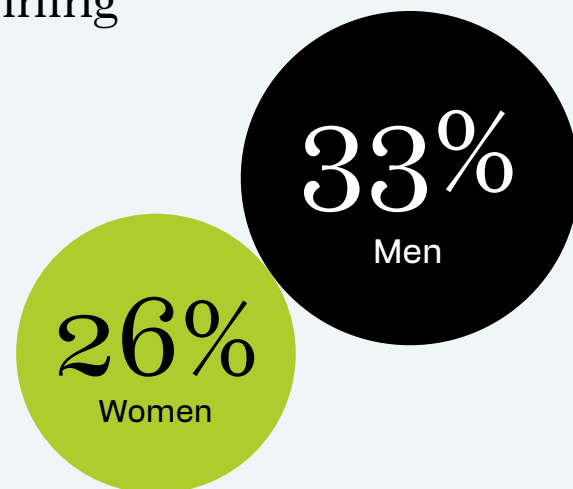
Almost one-quarter of respondents (22%) reported that they considered needing to raise sufficient campaign resources, and 20% considered whether they shared a background with their constituents. Family time was also a consideration (18%), and 17% considered the feasibility of having the finances to support their family during a campaign. Another 14% considered other factors in their decision to run. These other considerations included whether they had mentors to support them and approval and support from family.

Considerations prior to running

When thinking about the factors that shape the decision to run, a slightly higher percentage of men (33%) than women (26%) cited **spousal approval** as an important consideration.

More men (58%) considered whether they had a job that allowed them the time and flexibility to run, compared to 47% of women.

Additionally, ensuring that people like them had a voice in government was a stronger consideration for women (79%) than for men (70%).



Where Does Support Come From?

Encouragement

Respondents were asked specifically about organizations that encouraged them to run, and they could select as many organizations as they wished. One-third of respondents (33%) said they had been encouraged by organizations. Of those who had been encouraged, nearly half (48%) said they received this support from a political party. Cultural associations also played a notable role (32%), followed by unions (13%), parent associations (13%), and neighbourhood associations (13%).

Training

In preparing to run for elected office, almost half of respondents (46%) attended a candidate training workshop. Of those who participated in candidate training, 37% said it was sponsored by political parties, followed by Operation Black Vote Canada at 20%. Other sources of training included women's advocacy organizations (15%), municipal governments (10%), various community, cultural, and labour organizations (12%), and other organizations (7%).

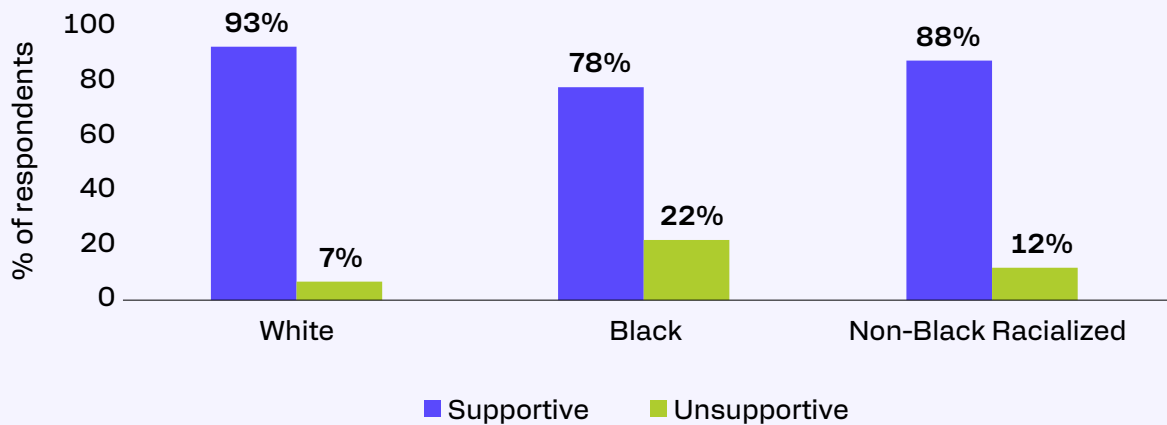
Community

Candidates were asked to assess the levels of support and encouragement they received from various racial communities. When asked to evaluate the support they received from the Black community, 78% of respondents said Black Canadians were somewhat or very supportive of their political aspirations, while 22% said they were either somewhat unsupportive or not supportive at all. Meanwhile, 93% of respondents said they found white Canadians somewhat or very supportive of their political aspirations, while 7% said they were somewhat unsupportive or not supportive at all. Finally, 88% of respondents found non-Black racialized communities somewhat or very supportive, while 12% found them somewhat unsupportive or not supportive at all.

These responses are surprising to some degree: one might expect Black candidates to find more support from those in the Black community rather than outside of it. However, this pattern might also reflect the country's political geography. Most electoral districts in Canada are predominantly white; to win, Black candidates need to attract support from these voters. As we discuss below, interviewees also put forward a number of other explanations for differences in community support.

FIGURE 2

Community Support for Political Aspirations, by racial group



Question: How supportive have [Black/white/non-Black racialized] Canadians been of your political aspirations?

Black Identity

Respondents were also asked about the importance of their Black identity. Most respondents (84%) said their Black identity is important to them; of these, 32% said it is very important, while 52% said it is extremely important. Meanwhile, 11% of respondents said their Black identity is somewhat important, and 6% said it is not important at all.

Respondents also identified whether they believed that what happens to Black people, in general, will affect what happens in their own lives. A significant proportion of respondents, 85%, felt their own fate is very or somewhat linked to the Black community, whereas 15% felt it is not very much or not at all linked. These data are indicative of a strong sense of collective identity and mutual support among Black individuals in politics.

Respondents were asked whether Black people should work exclusively with each other to gain political power, or if they should work with other groups. An overwhelming 90% of respondents recommended working with other groups, while 10% suggested working exclusively within the Black community. Respondents then assessed their connection to other Black Canadians.



Although 10% of respondents reported not being connected at all, 40% said they are somewhat connected, 34% are very connected, and 16% said they are extensively connected to other Black communities.

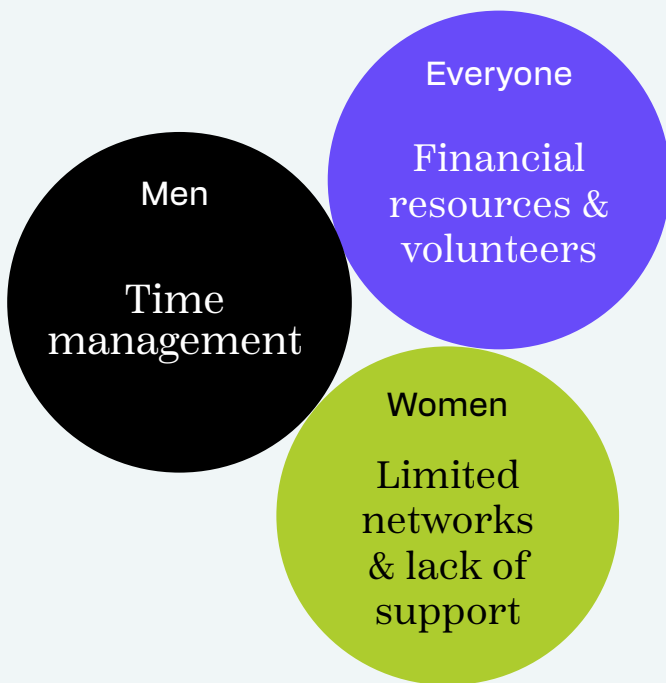
What are the Challenges?

Discouragement

Respondents were asked to share if they were discouraged from running for office and if so, to specify who discouraged them. Respondents could select all sources of discouragement that applied to them. Half of all respondents (50%) experienced some form of discouragement. Of those who did (n=47), 43% said they were discouraged by friends, co-workers or acquaintances, followed by an elected or appointed officeholder (26%), and members of organizations in their community (26%). Meanwhile, 21% of candidates were discouraged by family members, 13% were discouraged by a political party leader or official, and 15% by the incumbent for the office they were running for. Spousal discouragement was relatively low at 9%, and no candidates reported being discouraged by unions. Other sources of discouragement were noted by 30% of respondents, primarily from neighbours, community members, former officeholders, and women's advocacy organizations.²¹

Time, money, networks and support

Respondents were asked in an open-ended question to share the top three challenges they faced while running for elected office. The challenges faced by candidates varied widely, although the most frequently cited was a lack of financial resources (63%), followed by a shortage of volunteers (42%). Some of the other challenges included a lack of support and networks, time management, and racism and discrimination. Across all levels of government, the challenges noted by candidates are largely similar. However, candidates who had run at the federal level were more likely than candidates at other levels to emphasize the challenge of securing sufficient personal support and building their networks.



Challenges

Men and women reported experiencing similar challenges, particularly with respect to the availability of financial resources and volunteers.

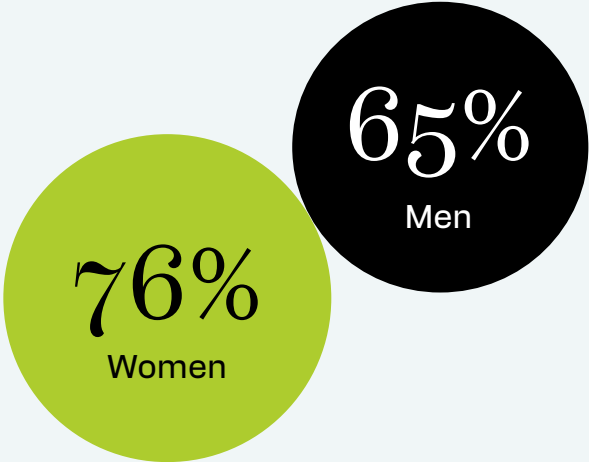
While the differences were minor, **women were more likely to cite limited networks and lack of support as challenges, compared to men who struggled more with time management.**

Discrimination

Respondents were asked to share if they had experienced discrimination or unfair treatment while running for or serving in office. Respondents could indicate multiple sources of discrimination. A significant number of respondents (71%) reported experiencing discrimination while running or serving for public office. Among those who faced discrimination (n=67), 66% encountered it from a community member on a doorstep, in their office, or at an event, and nearly half (49%) experienced it from someone on social media. Other candidates or officeholders were a source of discrimination for 57% of respondents, while 25% experienced discrimination from journalists. More than one-quarter (27%) reported discrimination from a legislative or municipal staff member, while party officials were less frequently cited (16%) as sources of discrimination. Twenty-two percent faced discrimination through other sources, including unions, businesses, their own campaign team, in the mail, or on campaign posters.²²

The experience of discrimination is somewhat gendered

76% of women respondents reported experiencing discrimination, compared to 65% of men.



Although white Canadians were identified in the survey as a source of electoral support, they can also be a significant barrier to inclusion. Of the candidates who reported that they had experienced discrimination, 90% reported encountering discrimination from white Canadians, followed by 36% from other racialized groups, and 28% from Black Canadians.

All respondents were shown a list of things that some people have experienced because of their race and were asked if any of these had occurred while they were running for or serving in office; they could select more than one response. Sixty percent of candidates said others had expressed surprise or disbelief about their involvement in politics, and almost half (48%) said they were treated as if they were unintelligent.

Additionally, 39% had experienced suspicion because of their race, 19% said they were unfairly stopped or asked for credentials by municipal or legislative staff, 18% were passed over for a promotion or appointment due to their race, and 12% were physically attacked or threatened with bodily harm while running for or serving in politics. Just under one-quarter of respondents (22%) had not experienced any of these things, and another 15% said they had encountered other negative behaviours or experiences because of their race.

Respondents were asked how racism in political spaces is typically handled. A significant portion of respondents said that racism in politics is either minimized or inadequately addressed; 36% of respondents felt racism is downplayed, while another 36% said it is acknowledged as wrong but little concrete action is taken to address it. Additionally, 15% believed racism was ignored altogether. Just 4% said those responsible were held accountable, while another 4% was unsure how racism was handled. Five percent of respondents said they had not seen much evidence of racism in their political experiences.



Respondents were also asked to share whether they felt that being Black influenced their success in politics. Overall, 63% of respondents felt that their race made it harder for them to succeed, while only 2% believed it made their success easier; 35% perceived no difference in this regard. Those who had never been elected were more likely to perceive their Blackness as a barrier, while the few respondents who said being Black made it easier for them had all experienced electoral victory.

“Campaigning in a remote predominately non-racialized area. Concerns for safety due to known racism that exists in the area.”

“Anti-Black racism at the doors and in media coverage.”

“Getting voters from my community to come out and vote as well as donate time and money.”

“Running against an incumbent who was well financed and who represented the governing party.”

Political parties

More than one-third of respondents (38%) had run for a political party at the federal or provincial/territorial level. Party nomination is typically the first stage in this process. At the federal level, other research suggests that only 17% of nomination contests involve a competitive process with two or more candidates.²³ Most nominations have just a single candidate or result in the appointment of the party’s candidate without any competitive process at all.

Our survey suggests that Black candidates are somewhat more likely than average to encounter competitive nomination contests: 28% of survey respondents who ran at the federal or provincial/territorial level entered through a nomination contest that involved two or more contestants. Meanwhile, 44%



69% of respondents with experience as federal or provincial/territorial candidates were nominated in districts where an incumbent from another party was seeking re-election.

participated in a nomination contest but they were the only contestant, while 28% were appointed as their party's candidate and there was no nomination contest at all.

Most respondents (69%) with experience as federal or provincial/territorial candidates were nominated in districts where an incumbent from another party was seeking re-election. Just under one-third (31%) ran in open seats without incumbent challengers. Incumbent candidates benefit from name recognition, an established voter base, and enhanced resources, which gives them a leg-up against competitors.²⁴ Open seats, by contrast, can level the playing field because all candidates are running without the benefit of incumbency. Other research suggests that racially minoritized candidates are less likely to be nominated in open seats than white candidates.²⁵

Because our survey looks only at Black candidates' experiences, we are not able to compare to other groups, but the results suggest that Black Canadians running at the federal and provincial/territorial level may emerge in more difficult electoral environments. This context could shape their electoral prospects.

What Does the Future Hold?

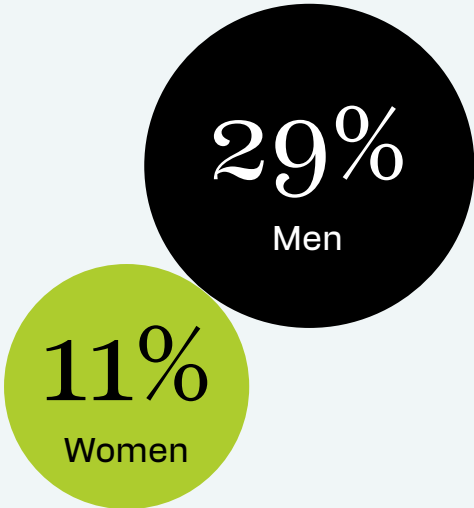
Despite the challenges they faced, most respondents (87%) said they would run for public office again. Of those who said they would run again, almost half (47%) said they aspire to serve as Members of Parliament, while 19% have set their sights on becoming party leaders. A notable 15% aspire to become mayors, and 9% aim to serve as regional, local, or municipal councillors, showing a commitment to local governance. Only 3% aspire to serve as school board trustees, a result that could reflect the large number of respondents who had already run for or served at this level. Interestingly, only 8% of Black candidates expressed an ambition to run as provincial or territorial legislators.

This result could reflect a lower level of interest in provincial policy concerns, or perhaps the ascendancy of provincial conservative parties; although many Black Canadians have run for and served in conservative parties—including Canada’s first Black MP, Lincoln Alexander—Black Canadians have historically run for left and centre parties. The strength of provincial conservative parties and the comparative under-representation of Black Canadians within them could be inadvertently shaping Black Canadians’ political aspirations.

Leadership aspirations

There are notable gender differences in political aspirations, with a significantly larger number of women aspiring to federal politics. **Of those who said they would run again, 61% of women aspired to do so federally, compared to just 29% of men.**

Leadership aspirations are also gendered: **29% of men aim to become party leaders, while only 11% of women share this ambition.** Likewise, 21% of men said they would like to run for mayor, compared to 11% of women.



Insights from the Interviews



Insights from the Interviews

Next, we examine key themes from our in-depth interviews with Black Canadians who have run for or served in elected office across all levels of government.

Navigating Black Identity and Political Identity

Participants were asked to reflect on their Black identity alongside their political identity. Their responses highlighted diverse ways of thinking about Blackness and contending with what Blackness means. These experiences were often contextualized alongside other identities, and a number of participants highlighted the heterogeneity of the Black experience.

*“One of the things we need to think about when we’re talking about ‘Black’ and how we invite people in and make them a part of the political landscape is to remember that it’s not only about being Black. . . . There are **many perspectives and identities** and so on within Blackness.”*

– Participant 29

*“I think the other challenge for people of African descent—Black people—is we often don’t make room for diversity and identity in the sense that **‘who we are’ is made up of a lot of different parts**. . . . Often as a Black person, you may feel you have to leave different parts of yourself out of the room or be mindful of how you present. I think there’s the burden of ‘If I don’t do this well, am I closing doors for people behind me?’”*

– Participant 25

Some pointed to divisions within the Black community because of this diversity. Differences were sometimes shaped by other intersecting identities, such as immigration or mixed-race backgrounds.

*“We are so **divided amongst ourselves**. It is terrible. If you’re going to write something, please write on that. . . . Within [participant’s ethnic group], we have our different tribes. Within the tribes, we have our different communities. And there are people within the community that would say, ‘Oh, you don’t speak your language well enough. You’re not good enough. . . . I’m usually the Blackest person in the room in terms of complexion, but I heard I wasn’t Black enough [because] ‘Oh, you are not Canadian, you are an immigrant.’ I’ve heard that.”*

– Participant 28

*“Whether you want to call me an ‘oreo’ or anything you want, it’s just the story of my life that it’s not going to happen for me with the Black community. It’s just not. . . . I kind of would have been shocked if I actually had support from the community. I’ve never had that experience, but I have certainly had people falling all over themselves to tell whoever it is that I shouldn’t be representing the Black community because I’m **somehow not Black enough**.”*

– Participant 24

Other participants highlighted diversity of thought within the Black community.

*“Even in my own community, the first thing [they asked] was ‘Why are you running for the Conservatives?’ . . . It is ludicrous for you to be like ‘Don’t vote for that Black brother because he’s a Conservative.’ . . . **We need Black people in every political party**. . . . I feel like we should uplift those who are seeking to run in and represent political parties in Canada, not to look at what colour the party is. . . . Not one party should own us. We should be able to have people in every party.”*

– Participant 21



Within this discussion, some participants noted the tension they felt between their role as “symbolic representatives” and their desire to make substantive change. They spoke about their experiences navigating politics within the Black community and with Black colleagues who support the status quo.

*“I would say it’s a **very hostile environment** for Black people who are doing authentic, real work. . . . I think that some [Black politicians] get there, and they like the power and position and [decide] ‘I’m not gonna rock the boat anymore.’ . . . So, it can be a very lonely place. It can be very exhausting.”*

– Participant 22

*“I think the thing that I learned most of all was that I was too political for politics . . . and **too Black for politics.**”*

– Participant 14

Community Support

The results of the survey suggested that Black candidates received more support from non-Black than Black Canadians when running for office. We shared that finding with interviewees and asked them what they made of it. One explanation they provided was the concentration of white voters relative to Black voters in most electoral districts; this numerical reality means that, to win, most candidates must generate support outside the Black community.

However, some participants pointed to immigration experiences and a lack of time as factors that might decrease Black Canadians' political participation. Other participants talked at length about the structural barriers and political marginalization that contribute to this apparent gap in support.

*“I didn’t necessarily have any Black people who were hostile to [my candidacy], but I think in the Black community, there is a **stigma around being a politician**. Many of us come from countries that we left because of politics. So, for example in [some countries], anytime it’s election time, we know that it’s not a good time to be there. There’s often political violence and so on. And I think many Black communities have trauma around those kinds of things. . . . I have relatives who believe that even participating in voting is somehow approving of the political realm. . . . I don’t know that we’ve done any kind of work to educate our various and diverse Black communities about the political system here, how it works and [how] representation would matter to them.”*

– Participant 23

*“It seemed **hard to ignite the passion and enthusiasm** of members of our community to come out and actually go and vote. Whether it’s because they grew up in a household where they . . . heard skepticism about politics and politicians—whether here in Canada or back home—whether it’s because they didn’t have parents or supports in the home [who] talked about the importance of casting a ballot. Whatever the reasons were, [there is] the feeling of ‘well, my vote is not going to make a difference, so why bother?’ . . . I wouldn’t say that’s the case for all racialized and Black [Canadians], but certainly it was a challenge, no question about it.”*

– Participant 3

*“I think there’s nuance in terms of **anti-Black racism**. We have to look at broader demographics in terms of gaining support and trust. . . . I don’t think that’s spoken about a lot, that there is racism and discrimination within other ethnicities and cultures that can have an impact on Black candidates as well.”*

– Participant 17

*“For a lot of Black Canadians, there is a real disenfranchisement. A real fatigue, **lack of faith in the political system**. So [the lack of support] is not necessarily a reflection of how they feel about you or your ability to do the role. It’s a reflection of how they feel that government functions and the ability of any Black person to be a part of that institution. . . . It’s like ‘It’s not personal, not voting for you. I’m not voting for anyone.’ . . . I’ve also had [Black] people say, ‘I’ve never voted ever, and I probably won’t again, but I will go and vote for you.’”*

– Participant 20

*“I’ll explain it this way. One, the Black community [has] been **marginalized from the political arena** for a long, long time. So, when somebody hasn’t participated in the full breadth of the political system for 20, 30, 50 years, and now [someone] says ‘Oooh, I want to bring you into the fold,’ it’s not going to be as smooth as one may think.”*

– Participant 12

“It wasn’t that they didn’t support me. They just didn’t know. They didn’t know . . . what election was happening. They didn’t really understand what that meant. . . . They knew what elections meant, but they didn’t really understand the difference between municipal, provincial, federal. They weren’t really sure how to help. You know, I’d be doing a doorknock. They’d be like ‘Absolutely not.’ [They] don’t want to be talking to people. They didn’t feel well informed about different topics [and didn’t feel] like they could represent me well. . . . It wasn’t for lack of support. It was more just . . . ‘This is not our field. So we’ll support you from behind the scenes, and we’ll cheer you on, and we’ll bring you food.’ But in terms of going out in the public and speaking . . . they felt out of place.”

– Participant 1

Participants emphasized, however, that while moral support is appreciated, ultimately it is votes and resources that most shape electoral outcomes.

*“Saying ‘yes, yes, I support you’ doesn’t win the vote. You have to go and vote. **The importance of coming out**, the importance of getting your vote out is what [will] make the change.”*

– Participant 4

*“The support is there. It’s how to bring people to manifest that support in terms of **time and money**. This is where I find that it’s not quite there yet, mainly because the community still doesn’t quite understand why it’s important for us to be in those spaces. . . . Part of the responsibility I think falls on us elected officials because we’re not really voicing it.”*

– Participant 26

Networks and Social Capital

In reflecting on the resources needed to succeed in politics, many participants spoke about the role of networks, both inside and outside the electoral arena. These participants underscored the importance of community relationships as integral to their political campaigns. They also noted that time and investment are needed to build and sustain these connections.

*“I can’t say enough about the people that were in my corner at the time, just providing me with guidance, with **moral support**.”*

– Participant 19

*“It’s not the campaign on the day you start, or the year you start. It’s the work that you’ve put in all these years and how you’ve built your relationships in your **networks** that matters.”*

– Participant 13

*“I’m well-known in this community. I’ve been **involved in this community** for 30-plus years. I chaired [committees], and I sat on a variety of things in the community. I have been involved with the YWCA . . . minor soccer. So I was not starting my campaign from a point of not being known.”*

– Participant 29

*“I was attuned enough to know when I started to entertain the thought of running, I started doing **a lot of legwork** and inserting myself in the community, aligning myself with organizations and with people. I really did a lot of that background work and almost made myself an obvious choice for people. So I think a lot of doors opened from people who are already in politics, involved in my neighbourhood, who saw me as a good candidate and who were willing to get behind me and help.”*

– Participant 20

*“I had a very supportive group that came to me when they found out I was going to run. A lot of people offered their **assistance**, support, and things of that nature. So it was it was very, very rewarding . . . that you had a support system out there that saw that you had value and you could contribute to your community.”*

– Participant 2

Experiencing and Overcoming Hardship

In spite of the support they received, most participants relayed that they felt isolated during their time in politics, and some linked this feeling to the underrepresentation of Black people in politics. Many described political spaces as “lonely.”

“I walk into a room, and I look to see who looks like me in the room. And I’m always looking for allies, always looking for people who are going to send me cues to make me feel safe. And if I don’t receive those cues, if I don’t see people that look like me, I assume that I am not in a safe space. . . I felt lonely. I felt always like the first Black woman, or the only Black person, or the only Black woman. . . . I loved being called a trailblazer, but trailblazers are lonely.”

– Participant 11

*“Representation matters. There are hashtags all over social media, but when you’re in these spaces and you don’t see it really, it really is in your face. . . . The **lack of representation**, not seeing people who that you believe that you could identify with leads to a sense of isolation. . . ‘Loneliness’ might be a strong word, but certainly isolation.”*

– Participant 3



Echoing the findings from our survey, many participants shared that they experienced various forms of discrimination throughout their political careers.

*“Ugh. I feel like being a woman, regardless of what space you’re in, you can oftentimes **feel out of place**, especially being a Black woman in [a smaller centre]. I very much felt out of place.”*

– Participant 30

*“So I experienced discrimination. . . . There were people who were adamant they **wouldn’t vote for me because I was Black**, because I maybe represent something that is scary to people. I had people tell me they only opened the door because I was with a white canvasser. . . . I had bylaw called on my partner when he was putting out signs. No other campaign experienced that.”*

– Participant 17

Some Black women politicians described experiencing racial and gendered discrimination from other Black Canadians as well.

*“I get more **misogyny from our own community** than others. You know what I mean? I was running for office, and the number of Black women who took it upon themselves to tell me no one was going to take me seriously if I wore purple wig, it was embarrassing. Because it tells me that you’re not listening to the substance of my words. You just want me to fit in with the people that you think are powerful because you don’t understand how power is cultivated. . . . Misogyny is misogyny is misogyny. It doesn’t take on a special context in our community.”*

– Participant 8

Other participants said they had not experienced overt racism. One participant noted that this could be because of the insidious ways in which discrimination is now enacted.

*“I’ve experienced **so much racism** throughout my whole life [and] racism has become so good at hiding itself behind different masks that sometimes you can’t really point at it and [say], ‘Aha, guys! Look. This is racism, right?’”*

– Participant 26

Similarly, another participant discussed their experience navigating what they described as the “omnipresence” of racial discrimination.

*“I don’t know if not running into it overtly was a measure of it not happening, or that **subconsciously** after a lifetime of doing this, you’ve navigated [in a way] to minimize running into it. So I would never say that it’s not an obstacle.”*

– Participant 25



For some participants, the media played a significant role in perpetuating racial discrimination. For instance, one participant was described as “aggressive” in the local newspaper for “trying to get too much done, too quickly” (Participant 31). A few participants said media coverage harmed their political careers (Participants 12 and 27).

Despite their experiences with individual and systemic discrimination, many participants indicated that this did not constitute the entirety of their political careers.

*“I didn’t use that as an excuse not to do what I needed to do, and I don’t use it as an excuse to say, ‘Hey, woe is me.’ At the end of the day, this is what we face, and we just have to **continue to move forward**. But it’s certainly part of the experience. And I want to be careful to say, it’s part of the experience, but it wasn’t the only experience.”*

– Participant 3

Specifically, participants highlighted receiving support from community members and Black mentors, which helped them to navigate their political careers.

*“There are times when I’m about to go into a council meeting, and I’ll get an email [from a] community member [that says] ‘you’re not sitting there alone.’ That type of **support is absolutely instrumental**. . . . There are times when I know there’s going to be a tough decision . . . and there will be members of the community who come in and join in the council meeting so that I know—and colleagues know—that there is community there supporting me.”*

– Participant 17

*“Before I accepted the initial nomination, I spoke to [a former Black politician], and I asked her every question that I could think of relating to policy and politics and how she felt as a Black woman, was she comfortable in the spaces. And she gave me a lot of really great **advice** on how to approach conversations and how to present yourself when you walk into a room. I found that conversation really did help me when I went into those debates or I went into meetings, and I didn’t necessarily feel like I should be there. I had a little voice in my head telling me ‘Yeah, this is where you’re supposed to be.’”*

– Participant 30

Other participants emphasized their own resilience and self-care as important tools.

*“You roll up your sleeves, and **you carry on** because we just have to carry on. . . . You say to yourself, ‘I’m not going to allow others to discourage me from my purpose.’”*

– Participant 3

*“The best advice I can give is [sometimes you need to] detach and **take time for self** because this work will consume you if you let it.”*

– Participant 22

Finally, participants underscored the importance of celebrating successes, however small.

*“I think a lot of times we [want to] acknowledge big success. Sometimes we think incrementalism is a bad word. . . . You want to hit the stars. . . . You aim for the stars, and well you landed on the moon. Okay, you’re not there yet. But we’re a lot further than we were. . . . Incrementalism as an objective is a bad thing [but] let’s not throw the baby out with the bathwater. . . . Be thankful for those people who push it a little bit further, so we have those **shoulders to stand on.**”*

– Participant 25

*“Last February, I met Martin Luther King III, and one of the questions he was asked at this presentation was how do you keep going [when] things just seem to be regressing. . . . And he said—and it really resonated with me—that you have to **celebrate each little win**. So every little inch you move that needle forward is a win.”*

– Participant 22

Recommendations

Recommendations

Results from the survey and interviews provide new insights into the experiences of Black Canadians in politics and help us pinpoint where future action can be taken. This section highlights concrete recommendations to increase the number of Black Canadians in politics and contribute to stronger, more representative elected institutions.

Communities



Recommendation:

Encourage community members to run for office

Support for prospective candidates stands out as a key catalyst—and potential barrier—to elected office. Many Black candidates told us they had not seriously considered running for office until someone else suggested it to them. However, a number of candidates also told us that a lack of support was a persistent hurdle. In some cases, this lack of support manifests as discrimination from within and outside their own communities. In other cases, candidates said they were discouraged by others from running. Given systemic racism and a history of institutionalized hostility toward Black Canadians, community members have good reasons to exercise caution. Many opt to pursue political action through non-electoral means, including community organizing.

But if there is a desire to effect change from within the electoral arena, support from the community is crucial. This support often comes from Black Canadians themselves. However, because Black Canadians do not make up a majority of any electoral district in Canada, that support must also come from others. If Canadians want to see more equitable and inclusive elected institutions, they need to provide moral, organizational, and financial support to a more diverse slate of candidates.



Recommendation:
Share stories of Black success

Many interviewees noted the power of success stories. They observed that too much focus can be put on the negative aspects of political involvement, and this can detract from the benefits. Interviewees suggested that not enough is known about Black Canadians' contributions to politics, history and society. They remarked on the importance of role models. Sharing stories of Black success can help shape young peoples' understanding of what is possible in politics.



Recommendation:
Focus on inclusion not just representation

Our tracking of candidacies over time shows that more and more Black Canadians are running for office. Results from our survey and interviews, however, show that while representation may be increasing, inclusion has not yet been achieved. Black politicians whom we surveyed and interviewed detailed the ways in which political and public spaces remain hostile to them. In advocating for change, we encourage communities to focus not only on how many Black Canadians run for and serve in office, but also how they are treated once there.

Political Parties



Recommendation:
Adopt multi-pronged recruitment strategies to diversify candidate slates

Evidence from our research suggests parties play an instrumental role in the identification and recruitment of Black candidates for office. They should continue to do this work and to do so with attention to other intersecting identities. Responses to our survey suggest, for example, that Black women are more likely to be encouraged to run by political parties than Black men. This pattern almost certainly reflects parties' good faith efforts to increase women's representation in politics.

It likely is also shaped by gendered patterns in candidate emergence: more than half of women respondents to our survey said they had not considered running at all until someone else suggested it, a sentiment shared by just 28% of men. Thus, there is good evidence that parties *should* be taking steps to encourage women to run. They should be mindful, however, of ensuring this type of encouragement takes a broad range of identities into account.

Our evidence suggests, for example, that most Black candidates come from the business, government, or legal sector; expanding the occupational sectors from which candidates are recruited would bring new experiences and perspectives into the electoral arena and diversify the pipeline into political office. Finally, Black Canadians' representation within parties varies across the ideological spectrum; we encourage all parties to develop outreach strategies tailored to Black communities.



Recommendation:

Provide transparent, accessible plain language guides on running for the party's nomination

Many political parties already offer comprehensive guides on the process to become party candidates. This outreach is particularly important for attracting candidates from historically under-represented groups. We encourage all parties to offer transparent and easily accessible information on becoming an electoral candidate.



Recommendation:

Develop inclusive workplace policies and codes of conduct to address racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination

Although the political arena has, over time, become more demographically diverse, results from our survey and interviews suggest many Black Canadians—even those who are elected—continue to be treated as though they do not belong. Many are subjected to racialized and gendered discrimination, including in elected institutions themselves. Addressing racism, sexism and other forms of exclusion is a whole-of-society enterprise, but through codes of conduct or inclusive workplace policies, political parties can help to set a normative standard about the types of behaviour that will—and won't—be tolerated in a healthy democracy. Doing so will help to improve political discourse and the treatment of candidates and officeholders but also ensure that we don't lose good politicians to a leaky pipeline of abuse and incivility.

Advocacy Organizations



Recommendation:

Provide resources to support candidate training schools and ensure these are accessible to candidates

Many organizations already provide candidate training. However, our evidence shows that less than half of Black candidates have accessed that training. Among those whom we surveyed and interviewed, many described challenges raising funds, building a voter base, and managing their campaigns, areas that are typically addressed in candidate training schools. Increasing access to these training programs, and ensuring prospective candidates are aware of them, would likely help to alleviate some of the difficulties candidates face in their pursuit of elected office.



Recommendation:

Support for candidate training is important, especially at the local level

For most Black candidates, school board and municipal elections are the entry point into politics. However, these are also the arenas where, in most Canadian cities, political parties are generally absent. This gap is significant given the training and organizational support that political parties provide to Black candidates at the federal and provincial levels. Candidate training provides new political entrants with essential information on running campaigns and winning elections, and one reason federal and provincial political parties can offer this support is because they are comparatively well-resourced, thanks to individual donors and public subsidy in the form of personal income tax credits.

Although some municipalities offer candidate training programs or other resources to help new political entrants launch municipal and school board campaigns, programs at the local level are often delivered by volunteer-led advocacy organizations that typically lack sustained funding. As a result, although Black Canadians are most likely to run for office at the local level, this is also the level where they receive the least training and organizational support. All levels of government are encouraged to dedicate funding to candidate training, and advocacy organizations should make this a priority. Amendments to the political finance regime could furnish the resources needed to support this recommendation.

Election Administration Agencies



Recommendation:

Address low voter turnout

Voter turnout, in general, is on the decline in Canada, and the rate of voting among Black Canadians is particularly low. There are many reasons why this might be the case, including barriers related to access (e.g., information on how and where to vote), political efficacy (e.g., interest in Canadian politics; feeling like one's vote will make a difference), and resources (e.g., time off from work to vote). Black politicians with whom we spoke recommended that efforts be made to provide culturally appropriate messaging about voter eligibility, access to polling stations, and the importance of political participation. Voting is a fundamental link in the representational chain, and it is vital to remove barriers to access. More diverse candidate slates provide voters with a wider range of options, a factor that could also increase turnout.



Recommendation:

Support the collection of racially disaggregated data on candidacies and officeholding in Canadian politics

A central goal of this project was to document the experiences of Black Canadians in politics. This research shows that Black Canadians encounter a political landscape that can be hostile to them. Unfortunately, data collection about running for and serving in office rarely includes racially disaggregated outcomes. For example, although the Library of Parliament has provided statistics on the gender of candidates and MPs for many years, they do not include systematic information on racial background. This racial gap prevents the tracking of progress and stymies efforts to introduce evidence-based solutions to the problem of political underrepresentation.

As part of the nomination and election process, agencies responsible for the administration of elections should collect demographic data on candidates—both successful and defeated—and provide a high-level report on their findings. These data could be used by researchers and other organizations to better understand racial inclusion in politics.

Media



Recommendation:

Train political reporters who cover Black candidates and communities

In both the survey and our interviews, respondents pointed to the media as a source of discrimination and anti-Black racism. Past research shows that the media do report differently on white and racialized candidates.²⁶ This reporting can shape voters' assessments of policy issues and electoral candidates, as well as community perceptions of the democratic system. Although media organizations have, in recent years, made efforts to improve their coverage of diversity issues and racialized communities, additional training and support could help to ameliorate this barrier to elected office. We recommend a best practice guide on avoiding bias in political reporting, more diverse source lists to ensure a range of perspectives are included, and the hiring of Black journalists and journalists who have experience covering Black communities in Canada.

Prospective Candidates



Recommendation:
Do your research

Prior to running, prospective candidates should take steps to understand the policies and positions of each political party, as well as the responsibilities of each level of government. They should also research the ward or district they plan to run in. This information will help them understand the range of political opportunities that are open to them and the challenges that they might face.



Recommendation:
Build a diverse and supportive network prior to running

Survey and interview respondents repeatedly noted the importance of networks to their political success. They also underscored the need to diversify their networks beyond their own circle of friends, to draw support from voters from many walks of life, and to provide access to a range of experiences and skill sets. This work needs to start well before a candidate submits their nomination papers to ensure a strong team is in place from day 1.



Recommendation:
Just do it

One of the most consistent findings across the survey and interviews was the recommendation to prospective Black candidates to “just do it.” Although our research reveals that the road to elected office is sometimes uphill, the vast majority of Black candidates said they would do it all over again if given the chance. When we asked Black politicians in our interviews what advice they would give to prospective candidates, they said things like believe in yourself, move forward, be comfortable in your own skin, you’re capable, and you can do it. As one interviewee put it, “Understand how powerful and influential you could be. Whether you run or you vote or you decide to strategize or advocate . . . we’re a powerful group. . . I just don’t think we understand our power. And more importantly, I don’t think we understand our collective power.”

Conclusion

Conclusion

This report captures evidence from a series of interviews and the first-ever national survey of Black Canadians who have run for and served at all levels of office in this country. Our goal was to produce the most comprehensive account of Black Canadians' experiences in politics: Who are they? Why do they run? How do they fare? And what barriers and successes do they have? Our data collection reveals a community that is keen to enter the political arena and to provide a voice for those who have historically been under-represented in elected institutions.

The determination of Black Canadians speaks to their unwavering commitment to creating change and improving their communities. It underscores the capacity to influence public policy and push past barriers that have long existed. Black Canadians' participation in public life positively impacts the communities that elect them, as well as policy and representation more broadly. By stepping forward, Black Canadians are helping to reshape leadership with strength, purpose, and a vision for a more inclusive future.

Political engagement and inclusion are not just “feel good” goals. Research across a variety of sectors suggests that better decision-making and more effective policies can be achieved when a wider range of voices, ideas, and experiences are included.²⁷ This report takes aim at that goal by providing evidence and recommendations to increase the number of Black Canadians in politics. When Black Canadians run and serve in elected office, we all win.

Appendix

Survey Questionnaire

This research project focuses on the participation and experiences of Black Canadians in elected politics. Do you identify as a Black Canadian?

- Yes
- No

How long ago did you last run for or serve in any elected office in Canada?

- In the past 12 months
- In the last 1-5 years
- In the last 6-10 years
- In the last 10-15 years
- In the last 16-20 years
- More than 20 years ago
- I have never run for or served in elected office in Canada

Electoral Experience

Altogether, which elected office(s) have you *run for* in Canada? Please select all that apply and include any office you currently hold.

- School board trustee
- Local councillor (e.g., region, municipal, town)
- Mayor
- Provincial or territorial legislature
- Federal House of Commons
- When you ran for school board, did you run as an independent candidate or as part of a slate of candidates?
 - Independent
 - Part of a slate of candidates

When you ran for council, did you run as an independent candidate or as part of a slate of candidates?

- Independent
- Part of a slate of candidates

When you ran for mayor, did you run as an independent candidate or as part of a slate of candidates?

- Independent
- Part of a slate of candidates

When you ran provincially or territorially, did you run as an independent candidate or as the representative of a political party?

- Independent
- Part of a slate of candidates

Which party was that? Please type the name in the box below.

When you ran federally, did you run as an independent candidate or as the representative of a political party?

- Independent
- Part of a slate of candidates

Which party was that?

- Bloc Québécois
- Conservative Party of Canada
- Green Party of Canada
- Liberal Party of Canada
- New Democratic Party
- Other

At which level did you *first run* for elected office?

- School board trustee
- Local councillor (e.g., region, municipal, town)
- Mayor
- Provincial or territorial legislature
- Federal House of Commons

How many times, in total, have you run for elected office in Canada?

Include campaigns at the school board, local, provincial, and federal levels, but exclude elections for party positions, unions, neighbourhood associations, or other organizations.

- Once
- Twice
- Three times
- Four times
- Five or more times

To which office(s) have you been *elected* in Canada? Please select all that apply, including any office in which you are currently serving.

- School board trustee
- Local councillor (e.g., region, municipal, town)
- Provincial or territorial legislature
- Federal House of Commons
- I have not yet been elected to office

How many times did you run for elected office before you were *first elected*?

- Elected on my first attempt
- Elected on my second attempt
- Elected on my third attempt
- Elected on my fourth attempt
- Elected on my fifth or higher attempt

Reasons for Running

People run for elected office for many reasons. Other than your desire to serve the public, what was the single most important reason why you decided to first run for office?

- A party leader or an elected official asked me to run
- I wanted to represent communities that have not traditionally had a strong voice in government
- I was dissatisfied with the incumbent
- I wanted to change the way government work
- There was a specific policy issue or problem I wanted to pursue
- I wanted a new personal or professional challenge
- Other (Please specify)

Candidates have mentioned other considerations that affected their decision to run. From the following list, which of the following considerations affected your decision to run for office the first time? Please select up to 4.

- Having sufficient financial resources to conduct a campaign
- Approval of my spouse or partner
- Ensuring that I have time to meet my family commitments
- Having sufficient financial resources to support my family
- Having an occupation that would allow me the time and flexibility to run for office

- Having a shared racial, ethnic, or cultural background with many of my constituents
- Making sure that people like me have a strong voice in government
- Being able to address a key public policy issue
- Other (Please specify)

Now we would like you to think about the time when you were making the *decision to run* for elected office for the very first time. Which of the following most accurately describes your decision?

- It was entirely my idea to run
- I had already thought seriously about running when someone else suggested it
- I had not seriously thought about running until someone else suggested it

Which individual or individuals suggested that you run? Please select as many choices as apply.

- My spouse or partner
- A union official
- An elected or appointed officeholder, other than the incumbent
- A member of an organization that I was active in, other than my party
- A leader or official from my party
- A friend, co-worker, or acquaintance
- A family member other than my spouse or partner
- The incumbent office holder for the office I hold now
- Other (Please specify)

And of these, who was the most influential in your decision to run for office for the first time?

- My spouse or partner
- A union official
- An elected or appointed officeholder, other than the incumbent
- A member of an organization that I was active in, other than my party
- A leader or official from my party
- A friend, co-worker, or acquaintance
- A family member other than my spouse or partner
- The incumbent office holder for the office I hold now
- Other (Please specify)

Were there any organizations that played an important role in encouraging you to run the first time?

- Yes
- No

What types of organizations were important in encouraging you to run the first time? Please select all that apply.

- Political party
- Labour union
- Parents' association
- Cultural or ethnic association
- Women's advocacy organization
- Immigrant association
- Chamber of commerce or small business organization
- Professional association
- Neighbourhood association
- Community-based advocacy group (e.g., Operation Black Vote, Equal Voice)
- Other (Please specify)

And of these, which was the most important in encouraging you to run the first time?

- Political party
- Labour union
- Parents' association
- Cultural or ethnic association
- Women's advocacy organization
- Immigrant association
- Chamber of commerce or small business organization
- Professional association
- Neighbourhood association
- Community-based advocacy group (e.g., Operation Black Vote, Equal Voice)
- Other (Please specify)

When you were making your initial decision to run for office, did anyone try to discourage you from running?

- Yes
- No

Who tried to discourage you? Please choose as many as apply.

- Spouse/partner
- Elected/appointed officeholder
- Member of a community organization
- Union official
- Family member (not spouse/partner)
- Political party leader/official
- Friend, co-worker, or acquaintance
- Incumbent for the office you ran for
- Other (Please specify)

Now we'd like to ask you about support you've received from various groups. How supportive have *Black Canadians* been of your political aspirations?

- Very supportive
- Somewhat supportive
- Somewhat unsupportive
- Not supportive at all

How supportive have *non-Black racialized Canadians* been of your political aspirations?

- Very supportive
- Somewhat supportive
- Somewhat unsupportive
- Not supportive at all

How supportive have *white Canadians* been of your political aspirations?

- Very supportive
- Somewhat supportive
- Somewhat unsupportive
- Not supportive at all

Did you attend any candidate training programs or workshops to help you prepare to run for elected office?

- Yes
- No

Who sponsored the training?

Thinking back to your first election campaign, what were the three biggest challenges you faced? Please write them below, in any order.

Running for a Party

[asked to respondents who ran at federal, provincial or territorial level]

Thinking about when you *first ran* for elected office at the provincial/territorial or federal level, which of these scenarios best describes that situation?

- There was no incumbent; it was an open seat
- There was an incumbent from another party seeking re-election
- My party's incumbent was seeking re-election, and I opposed them for the nomination

And when you first ran for provincial/territorial or federal office, which of the following occurred:

- There was a nomination contest, but I was the only candidate
- There was a nomination contest with 2 or more candidates
- There was no nomination contest; I was appointed

And were any of the other nomination candidates also Black Canadians?

- Yes, one or more of the other nomination candidates were also Black Canadians
- No, I was the only Black Canadian candidate for the party's nomination

Future Aspirations

If you had the necessary political support and the right opportunities, would you run for elected office again?

- Yes
- No

What is the highest office you would like to hold in the future?

- School board trustee
- Regional, local, or town councillor
- Mayor

- Provincial or territorial legislator
- Member of Parliament
- Party leader

Experiences in Politics

Do you feel that being Black made it harder or easier for you to succeed in Canadian politics, or has it not made much difference?

- Harder for me
- Easier for me
- It has not made much difference

To gain political power, do you think Black people should work exclusively with each other to gain political power, or they should work with other groups? Which view is closer to your perspective?

- Work exclusively with each other
- Work with other groups

The Black community has diverse ethnic, national, religious, and linguistic characteristics. Outside your own specific Black community, how connected do you consider yourself to *other* Black communities?

- Extensively connected
- Very connected
- Somewhat connected
- Not connected at all

While running for or serving in elected office in Canada, did you personally experience discrimination or unfair treatment because of your race?

- Yes
- No

Who engaged in this discrimination or unfair treatment? Please select all that apply.

- A community member on a doorstep, in my office, or at an event
- Someone on social media
- A journalist
- Another candidate or officeholder
- A party official
- A legislative or municipal staff member
- Other (Please specify)

And thinking about the discrimination or unfair treatment you have experienced in politics, who has this tended to come from? Please select all that apply.

- White Canadians
- Other Black Canadians
- Non-Black racialized Canadians

Here are a few things that some people have experienced because of their race. Did any of these happen to you while you were running for or serving in elected office in Canada? Please select all that apply.

- People being surprised or acting as though you don't belong in politics
- Being passed over for a leadership position or appointment because of your race
- People acting as though they think you are not smart
- People being suspicious of you because of your race
- Being unfairly stopped or asked for credentials by municipal or legislative staff
- Being physically attacked or threatened with bodily harm
- Other (Please specify)
- I haven't experienced any of these things

In your experience, when racism occurs in political spaces, how is it normally handled?

- Those responsible are held accountable
- People downplay it
- People acknowledge it is wrong but take little concrete action to address the situation
- It is ignored altogether
- I'm not really sure how it is handled
- I haven't really seen much evidence of racism in political spaces

Demographics

To help us understand the characteristics and experiences of those who run for elected office, we would like to know a bit more about your background. All of your answers are confidential.

Although we wear many hats, outside of politics, what was your **primary occupation**?

- Natural resources and agriculture (e.g., farming, logging, fossil fuels)
- Business (e.g., entrepreneur, real estate agent, consultant)
- Education (e.g., teacher, professor)
- Government and politics (e.g., political staff, civil service, administration)
- Physicians and doctors
- Other health care (e.g., dentist, nurse, pharmacist, physiotherapist)
- Journalism
- Law
- Other: _____

Thinking about the *first time you ran* for office (at the school board, municipal, provincial/territorial or federal level), were you:

- Single
- Married/ cohabiting
- Divorced
- Widowed

That *first time you ran* for office, did you have any children under the age of 18 living at home with you?

- Yes
- No

How old were you that *first time you ran* for office?

- Under 20 years
- 20-29 years
- 30-39 years
- 40-49 years
- 50-59 years
- 60-69 years
- 70 years or over

The *first time you ran* for office, what was the highest level of formal education that you had completed?

- Elementary school
- High school
- College or a trade school
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate or professional degree (e.g., Masters, PhD, law, medicine)

Now thinking about when you were *first elected* to office, were you:

- Single
- Married/ cohabiting
- Divorced
- Widowed

When you were *first elected* to office, did you have any children under the age of 18 living at home with you?

- Yes
- No

And how old were you when you were *first elected* to office? Please enter the numeric value below.

- Under 20 years
- 20-29 years
- 30-39 years
- 40-49 years
- 50-59 years
- 60-69 years
- 70 years or over

How do you describe your gender?

- Man
- Woman
- Non-binary, gender variant, non-conforming
- Something else: _____

Were you born in Canada?

- Yes
- No

Were your parents born in Canada?

- Yes, both parents were born in Canada
- Yes, one parent was born in Canada
- No, neither parent was born in Canada

Black Canadians have diverse cultural and ethnic origins. With which of the following groups do you identify?

- Canadian
- Caribbean
- East African
- West African
- African American
- Latin American
- Something else: _____

How central is Blackness to your identity and how you think about yourself?

- Extremely important
- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Not important at all

Do you believe that what happens generally to Black people will affect what happens in your life?

- A lot
- Some
- Not very much
- Not at all

Interview Guide

1. How did your childhood and upbringing shape your political involvement?
2. Can you tell me what it has been like to be an African-descended /Black person in Canadian politics? What do political spaces look like to someone like you?
3. Obviously, there are different layers to our identities (e.g., gender, age, immigration status). How did you understand these and navigate them in politics?
 - a. What advice did you receive about this? For example, did you receive advice on whether or not to run “as a Black person?”
4. Now I'd like to talk about the resources that were available to you as you navigated politics.
 - a. What types of resources were offered and accessible to you?
 - b. Follow-up: How were they made available and accessible for you?
5. Did you participate in any candidate or campaign training schools?
 - a. **If yes:** was it helpful? Why or not?
 - b. **If no:** why not?
6. What resources do you *wish* would have been offered to you that you think may have made a difference in your political career?
7. People often talk about doors opening and closing in politics.
 - a. Who helped open doors for you?
 - b. Follow-up: And who closed doors?
8. Did you experience discrimination in politics? [*if no, skip to Q9*]
 - a. Follow-up: Did your experience of discrimination change over the course of your political career?
 - b. Follow-up: What, if any, support did you receive to navigate discrimination in the various stages of your political career?

9. What communities / organizations were you connected to when you first ran for office?
 - a. Follow-up: What did you do to mobilize them?
 - b. Follow-up: Could you count on them for fundraising, organizational and other support?
10. One of the results that surprised us in the survey that we did of Black Canadian candidates was in response to this question on support from communities. Respondents were more likely to say that white Canadians were supportive of their political aspirations than Black or other racialized Canadians were. What do you make of this?
11. What advice would you give to Black Canadians considering a career in politics?
12. If our goal is to increase the number of Black Canadians in politics, what do you think needs to be done?

References

- 1 Some histories recognize Shadd as the first Black elected official in Canada. Others recognize Abbott. In some sources, Abbott's date of election to council is listed as 1840; in others, it is recorded as 1847, 1858, or later. Based on primary sources, one historian believes that while Abbott may have run unsuccessfully for council earlier, he was not elected until 1858 (Winks 2022). These inconsistencies are partly a reflection of the time period but also reveal the ways in which Black history has been absent from "official" histories.
- 2 Howard McCurdy and George Elliott Clarke, *Black Activist, Black Scientist, Black Icon* (Halifax: Nimbus, 2024), 1.
- 3 We use the terms "Black" and "Black Canadian" to refer to this group, acknowledging that this terminology is fraught and papers over the differences within and between these diverse groups.
- 4 Black Canadians in Electoral Politics, "Milestones in the History of Black Canadians in Politics," <https://blackcanadianpolitics.ca/milestones-for-black-canadians-in-electoral-politics/>.
- 5 Black Canadians in Electoral Politics, *Black Canadian Candidates Dataset*, <https://blackcanadianpolitics.ca/datasets/>.
- 6 To help us improve the archive of information on Black Canadians in politics, please visit: <https://blackcanadianpolitics.ca/datasets/>.
- 7 The survey received ethics clearance from the Carleton University Research Ethics Board (protocol #117425).
- 8 Joshua D. Kertzer and Jonathan Renshon, "Experiments and Surveys on Political Elites," *Annual Review of Political Science* 25(2022): 529-550.
- 9 Some survey questions were based on, or adapted from, existing research; see Lorne Foster, Stella Park, Hugh McCague, Marcelle-Anne Fletcher, and Jackie Sikdar, *Black Canadian Nation Survey: Interim Report* (Toronto: York University Institute for Social Research, 2021) https://blacknessincanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/0_Black-Canadian-National-Survey-Interim-Report-2021.2.pdf; Christian Dyogi Phillips, *Nowhere to Run: Race, Gender and Immigration in American Elections* (London: Oxford University Press, 2021); and research by Sharon D. Wright Austin, Richard T. Middleton and Rachel Yon, "The Effect of Racial Group Consciousness on the Political Participation of African Americans and Black Ethnics in Miami-Dade County, Florida," *Political Research Quarterly* 65.3 (2012): 629-641.
- 10 The interviews received ethics clearance from the Carleton University Research Ethics Board (protocol #118664 and #119960). Interviews were conducted by Nana aba Duncan, Britney Andrew, and Chantel Jeremiah.
- 11 A copy of the questionnaire is included in the appendix.
- 12 Some questions allowed respondents to select more than one answer, so totals sometimes exceed 100 percent.
- 13 Adrienne M. Davidson, R. Michael McGregor and Myer Siemiatycki, "Gender, Race and Political Ambition: The Case of Ontario School Board Elections," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 53.2 (2020): 461-475.
- 14 Municipal political parties exist in some provinces and cities in Canada. Among municipal council candidates, 27% were affiliated with a political party, compared to 9% of school trustee candidates; no mayoral candidates ran under a political party label.
- 15 The survey, of course, only captures the partisan affiliations of those who responded, but this skew toward parties on the centre and left is consistent with our own research on the backgrounds of Black Canadian candidates and officeholders (see Black Canadians in Electoral Politics, *Black Canadian Candidates Dataset*). It also broadly mirrors patterns of partisan identification among racialized candidates (see Anna Johnson, Erin Tolley, Melanee Thomas & Marc André Bodet, "A New Dataset on the Demographics of Canadian Federal Election Candidates," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 54.3 (2021): 717-725; Jerome Black, "Racial Diversity and the 2021 Federal Election: Visible Minority Candidates and MPs," *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 45.2 (2022), <https://www.revparlcan.ca/en/racial-diversity-and-the-2021-federal-election-visible-minority-candidates-and-mps/>).
- 16 Natalie Domey and Nataalka Patsiurko, *The Diversity of the Black Populations in Canada, 2021: A Sociodemographic Portrait* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2024), <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-657-x/89-657-x2024005-eng.htm>.
- 17 See Black Canadians in Electoral Politics, *Black Canadian Candidates Dataset*.
- 18 Black Canadians in Electoral Politics, *Black Canadian Candidates Dataset*.
- 19 Daniel Stockemer, Kaitlin Gallant, and Erin Tolley, "Limited supply: Youth underrepresentation in the Canadian House of Commons," *Electoral Studies*, 88 (2024): 102747.

- 20 Johnson et al., "A New Dataset," 717–725.
- 21 These respondents used an open text box to indicate what other sources of discouragement they encountered.
- 22 These respondents used an open text box to indicate what other sources of discrimination they encountered.
- 23 Paul E.J. Thomas and Michael Morden, *Party Favours: How Federal Election Candidates are Chosen* (Toronto: The Samara Centre for Democracy, 2019).
- 24 Chad Kendall and Marie Rekkas, "Incumbency advantages in the Canadian parliament," *Canadian Journal of Economics* 45.4 (2012): 1560-1585.
- 25 Erin Tolley, "Gender is Not a Proxy: Race and Intersectionality in Legislative Recruitment," *Politics and Gender* 19.2 (2023): 373-400.
- 26 Erin Tolley, *Framed: Media and the Coverage of Race in Canadian Politics* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016).
- 27 Walid Ben-Amar, Claude Francoeur, Taïeb Hafsi, and Réal Labelle, "What Makes Better Boards? A Closer Look at Diversity and Ownership," *British Journal of Management* 24.1(2013): 85-101; Vivian Hunt, Dennis Layton, and Sara Prince, *Diversity Matters* (London: McKinsey & Company, 2015), <https://www.insurance.ca.gov/diversity/41-ISDGBD/GBDEExternal/upload/McKinseyDivmatters-201501.pdf>; Daryl G. Smith and Natalie B. Schonfeld, "The Benefits of Diversity: What the Research Tells Us," *About Campus* 5.5(2000): 16-23.



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