



# Serving in Local Elected Office

*Why people run, decline to run, remain serving, or step down from office, and the impact on local government*





# Serving in Local Elected Office:

*Why people run, decline to run, remain serving, or step down from office, and the impact on local government*  
—A Citizens League Report

## Introduction

Local elected office is a vital part of U.S. democracy, a place where democracy can be seen in action. Casting a vote for a city council member or a mayor in one's local community is a neighbor electing a neighbor to help their community thrive. Many serve in these roles on top of a full-time job for very little pay. In the full spectrum of electoral democracy, the local elected office remains a very personal, relational, and community-focused role.

In recent years, however, there has been growing concern that national ideological forces overly shape local elections and that single issues overtake broader community needs. Many say that the political climate at the local level has become toxic, for a variety of reasons. Candidates and elected officials speak of external pressures, verbal attacks, and even personal threats.

The Citizens League, as a nonpartisan nonprofit organization, is committed to engaging people of many perspectives in public policy and civic life. We seek to illuminate the ecosystem around governing and problem-solving at the local and regional levels. Thus, these growing concerns about local government led an organization like ours to ask how we can best support and what role we can play in ensuring a healthy civic climate, where people of various backgrounds have both the desire and the ability to run for office confidently and serve their communities effectively.

But first, we needed to understand, who was running and why? What causes people to step down from elected office? What is frustrating and rewarding about running for office and serving in local government?

The best way to find out is to ask the people doing the job. And so, we asked.

Throughout the summer and fall of 2022, the Citizens League sought out the voices and perspectives of those who have been asked to serve, those currently serving, and those running for local office (city council and mayor) in the Twin Cities (Minneapolis-Saint Paul) 7-County Metro area. This included outreach to 70 municipalities, home to approximately 3,163,104 people in the total Twin Cities 7-County Regional Metro.<sup>1</sup> We heard from 80 individuals through surveys and one-on-one interviews.

This report is also offered as encouragement for those who would consider running for office at the local level, especially those who may initially say *what could I bring to that role?* or even think *that's not for me*. Perhaps it will be, someday.

It's also a reminder to encourage others to run: people do not often run out of their own volition but because of their networks and social contacts. People must be encouraged to run for elected office (and asked again and again!), especially those who are hesitant or underrepresented in local government based on their gender, age, race, economic access, ability, and political ideology.

It is our hope that this report contributes to robust conversations about local governance, and spurs actions to support this unique and vital aspect of civic life.

## Project overview

This project, and the report that follows, was intended to be an exploratory study and a landscape review. We sought to understand the individual trajectories and experiences of people who have been asked to run for office and those who have become elected officials. This included exploring why people choose to run for office; the support systems leading up to and during campaigns; how elected officials are sustained during their time in office; and how elected officials connect with their constituents' needs, provide democratic representation, and focus on governance during civil polarization around many socio-political issues.

The project aimed to learn about the ongoing experience of elected officials and their engagement process and how even those in political disagreement with their constituents and colleagues work to find ways of reaching common ground around decision-making. Finally, questions were asked to determine what factors supported or challenged an elected official's decision to remain in office, keep their original platforms, or shift their priorities while serving in office.

To provide robust independent analysis, a researcher external to the Citizens League coded and analyzed the survey and interview responses. (A description of the methods used in this project are shown in the Addendum.)

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<sup>1</sup> [Data from the Metropolitan Council 2020 Census Report](#)

Responses showed that candidates entered the policy-making arena based on a combination of social connections around leadership and voice, politically connected referrals, and personally motivating issues impacting their communities. Candidate platforms were inspired by wanting to provide service to their communities, making long-term impacts, and solving problems around constituent needs in nonpartisan and unifying ways.

Throughout the report when a quote is shared, it is noted whether the respondent is a person of color. Analysis of themes also indicates when some experiences were expressed more frequently by people of color rather than being similar across all the respondents. This information is offered to help illuminate some of the experiences of non-White individuals serving in local elected offices in the Twin Cities metro area. These findings are important to note as leaders of all political identities across the spectrum seek ways to build inclusive and representative community leadership. Of course, race is not the only factor that should be considered in this effort, but it is one that stood out in the surveys and interviews conducted for this project.

This report concludes with recommendations of ways to support individuals who serve in these roles, and resources for those who may be interested in serving.

## **Background: Civic participation and a healthy democracy**

Minnesota has a rich history of active civic engagement and is consistently top in the country for voter turnout and volunteerism. For example, in the 2020 presidential election, 80% of Minnesota's eligible voters showed up to vote,<sup>2</sup> making Minnesota number one in the country for voter participation. Even during split government at the legislature, the state has had a history of bipartisanship that stood out amidst deeply polarized state governments. Many looked to Minnesota not only for our high civic engagement, but also to the governance-first candidates running and being elected in office.

Research also shows that places like Minnesota, where there is high civic engagement, can model healthy democracy.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the key ideas for a democracy that include: popular sovereignty, natural rights, and the rule of law,<sup>4</sup> experts agree that a healthy democracy has four essential areas: 1. Access to free and fair elections, 2. Active civic participation in all areas, 3. Protection of human rights, 4. The rule of law equally applies to all citizens.<sup>5</sup> It is also important to note

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<sup>2</sup> Minnesota Compass report: [Quality of Life, Civic Engagement](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Creating a Healthy Democracy](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Political Foundations of Democracy and the Rule of Law](#)

that political diversity and strong political parties play a key role in creating a healthy representative democracy.<sup>6</sup> In addition to strong political diversity and strong political parties, diverse candidates are key to creating access.<sup>7</sup> For example, one study found that when local candidates were of the same ethnic background as a large portion of their residents, especially in predominantly Black or Hispanic areas, they prioritized access to essential local services.<sup>8</sup> This highlights the importance of candidate diversity, particularly in local elections.

On the other hand, Minnesota is not immune to the polarization sweeping the country.<sup>9</sup> A study by Wesleyan University showed that polarization in Minnesota remained at a low consistent pace, however, in 2010 it increased drastically with yet another big spike in 2016,<sup>10</sup> which marked a presidential election. The overall trends in Minnesota are in alignment with national trends, as experts often point out that purple states, where the legislature can easily be controlled by either Republicans or Democrats, can experience greater polarization.<sup>11</sup>

These aspects of a healthy democracy, and the trends around polarization, are offered as context and background for the themes that emerged from this project.

## Respondents

The data shown in this report reflects the social demographics of candidates and current elected officials who participated in this project. We collected responses from Minneapolis, Saint Paul, first and second ring suburbs, and exurbs (communities beyond the suburbs, which often include partially rural areas) within the seven-county metropolitan area – an area with an approximate 370 mayoral and city council positions. Responses were received from 22% of these potential participants, including a small percentage of respondents who have been asked to serve, but have not run for office. While these positions are technically nonpartisan, respondents were asked to self-identify their political identification, or that which is closest to their values, and responses were distributed across the political spectrum.

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<sup>5</sup> [\*Democracy: Its Meaning and Dissenting Opinions of the Political Class in Nigeria: A Philosophical Approach\*](#)

<sup>6</sup> [\*Common Democracy\*](#)

<sup>7</sup> [\*Voting in Initiative Elections: Does the context of racial and ethnic diversity matter?\*](#)

<sup>8</sup> [\*Voting in Initiative Elections: Does the context of racial and ethnic diversity matter?\*](#)

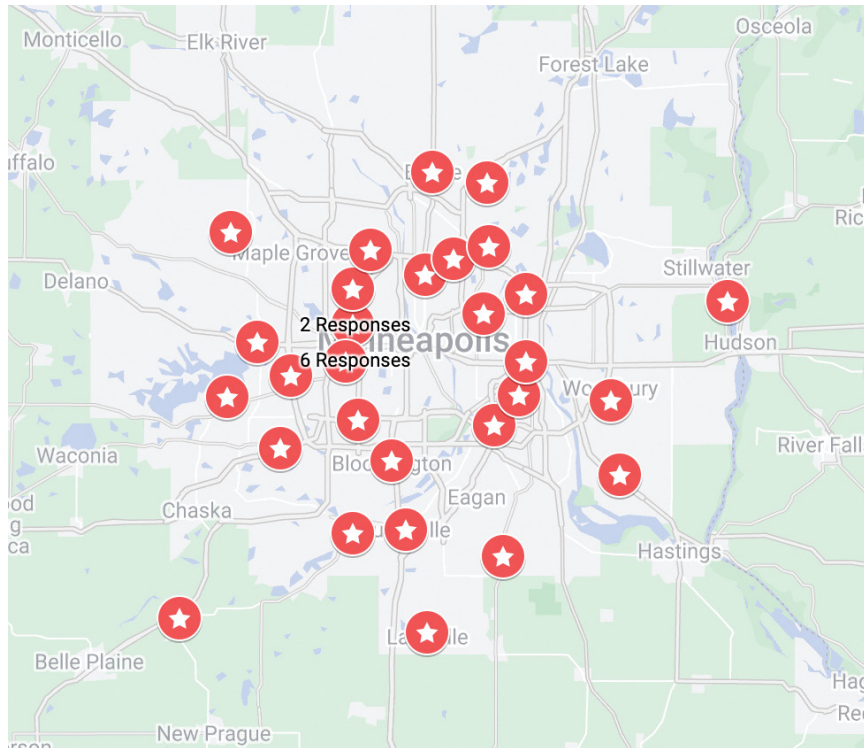
<sup>9</sup> Pew Research shows a constant increase in polarization in their report: [\*America is exceptional in the nature of its political divide\*](#)

<sup>10</sup> [\*Trends in Polarization: A case study of Connecticut, Minnesota, and Georgia\*](#)

<sup>11</sup> [\*Trends in Polarization: A case study of Connecticut, Minnesota, and Georgia\*](#)

# GEOGRAPHY OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Click [here](#) for live search



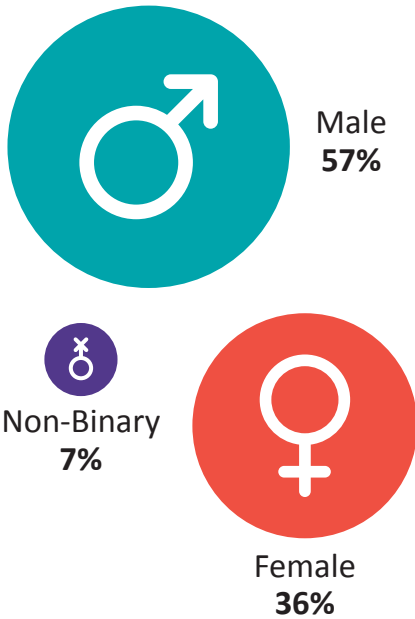
## CANDIDATES DESCRIBE THE ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH THEY RAN FOR OFFICE

"What are three words to describe the environment in which you ran for office?"  
Size of word correlates to frequency of response

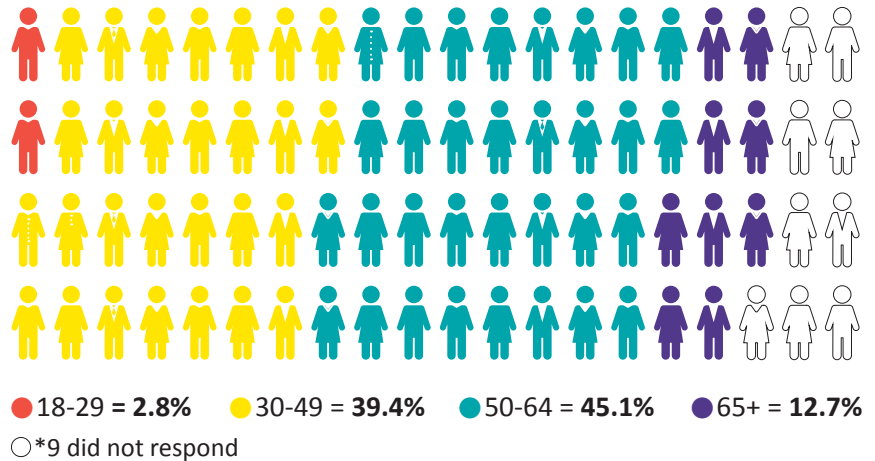


# TOTAL PARTICIPANTS AT A GLANCE

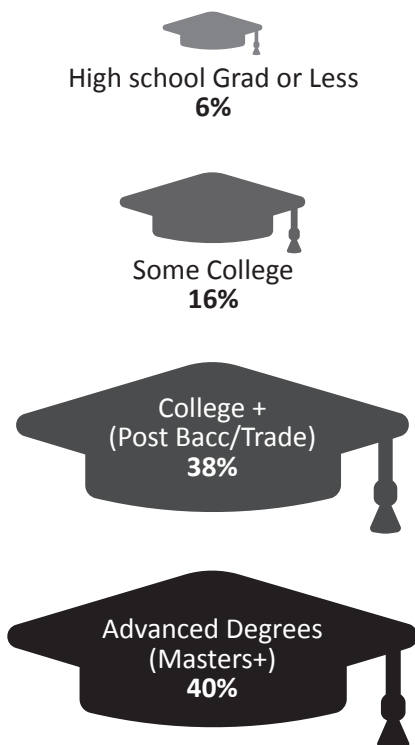
## GENDER



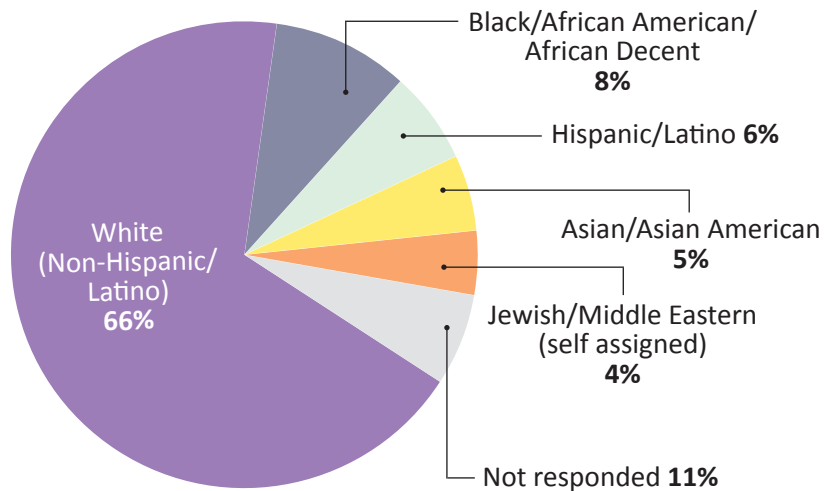
## AGE



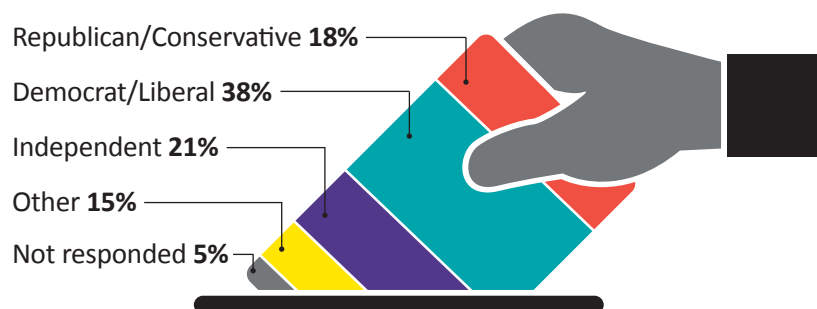
## EDUCATION



## RACE



## POLITICAL IDENTITY/AFFILIATION





## Themes that emerged from the responses

### **Theme One: The social referral process and support systems**

Candidates who run for office are public-serving, community-engaged individuals, actively involved in meeting community needs. There was recurring evidence that the respondents had some social capital in the local policy arena based on their impact within their communities. The people who ended up running were almost all referred to run by others who worked with them and saw value in their leadership, voice, and unifying

power. Thus, candidates first need to demonstrate community support behind their leadership vision. These people were also referred to run by others involved in serving the community. They saw the candidates as individuals who could speak directly to the “issues” (beyond partisanship) and make an impact. One respondent said, “Members of the community encouraged me to run. I supported a candidate... I did door knocking and realized that I could run my own campaign.”

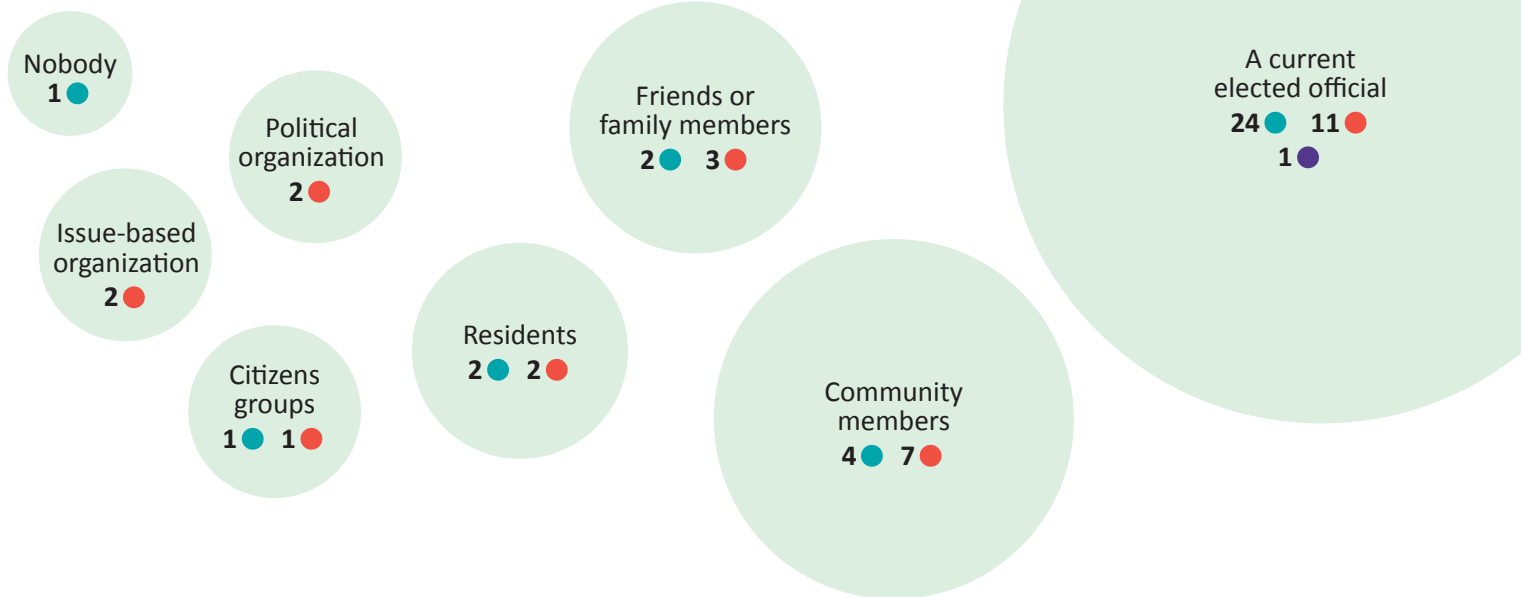
Other candidates and elected officials spoke of mentored support, from existing leaders, especially those who have served in office, and found value in the candidate’s efforts and vision for the community. These more knowledgeable allies provide a knowledge base and key guidance for the candidate in how prepared they are to run and lead. To demonstrate this, one candidate explained, “I have been working adjacent to politics, and two open seats existed, and the mayor asked me to run, so I did. I wanted to maintain [my] small-town community culture while making space for growth.”

Many of the candidates and elected officials also spoke of their family members or spouse recommending that they run, attesting to the need for personal support in making the decision to run, as the campaigning process is demanding of family units. Having individuals in personal networks offering their beliefs and willing to undergo public pressure as a unit can be deeply motivating for potential candidates. As another candidate said, “My wife asked me to run because she knew I had a passion for community service, so after I completed my qualifying exams for my [degree] I wanted to get involved in the community to reignite my passion for service.”



# WHO ASKED YOU TO RUN FOR OFFICE?

♂ Male
 ♀ Female
 ⚧ non binary



Something to note is that only one respondent reported choosing to run solely of their own volition; all others were encouraged by at least one other person. Additionally, men were overwhelmingly more likely to be asked to run first by an elected official, while women were most likely to be asked first by community members.



## Theme Two: Issue Gateways as a Path to Policy

A recurring duality emerged from the participants' experiences. An initial set of issues marked by historic and social relevance and context sparked an interest to engage in local politics, if only to improve current community outcomes. These initial issues were often emotion-driven, politically charged, and personally relevant. For example, most of our interview participants discussed one of these gateway issues as their initial desire to see something different happening with police in light of Philando

Castille and George Floyd's deaths. The historical and global impact of their deaths at the hands of the police marked the Twin Cities as a site for civil engagement and uprising. One respondent shared, "I wanted to help the community recover from the killing of Philando Castille", demonstrating the importance of this moment in spurring individuals into the policy arena. Another candidate described his concerns

and how to address them: “My biggest priority is policing and public safety, and I am proud of how far we have come. Officers now have body cams and other forward-thinking policies.”

However, these emotionally charged gateway issues did not remain the sole focus for the policy platforms around which the candidates eventually won or made political gains. In some cases, they were the gateway to broader policy decisions. For many candidates who were elected, the focus shifted over time towards sustainable policy decisions driven by community needs and bipartisan unity. For example, one respondent described in their survey what started this journey for them was an affordable housing plan, which led to their eventual transition into a broader policy pathway.

Similarly, numerous candidates and elected officials several times addressed the following areas of policy that sustained their focus long-term in office:

- Public works and infrastructure
- Taxes
- Access to resources and services
- Improving community spaces
- Systemic determinants of health, such as housing, food supply, and education
- Climate change
- Community culture



### **Theme Three: Barriers and Challenges**

Reported barriers varied across the demographic backgrounds of participants. However, for most participants regardless of demographic identity, the areas noted as barriers were predominantly finances, transparency, and polarization.

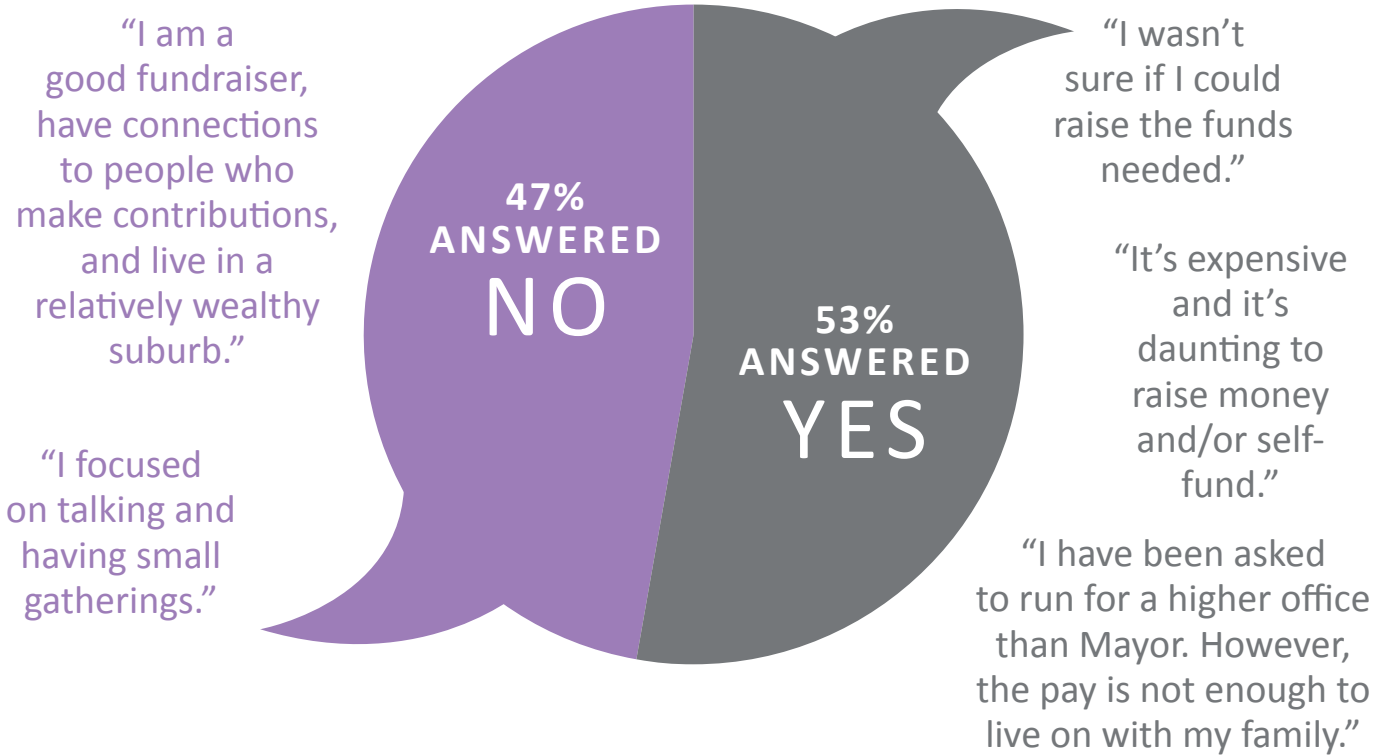
Finances, raising money, and sustaining the role of a local elected official, presented a challenge. One candidate described, “fundraising was a challenge and attracting [donors/funds] in a small community is difficult.”

Other candidates and elected officials agreed, “The challenge really is independent nonpartisan funding. This time I have learned how to fundraise and build leadership and access in the community for candidates.”

In exploring salary and compensation for local elected officials, we found that across the seven-county metro (excluding Minneapolis and Saint Paul), the approximate average salary for mayors is around \$12,320 per year,<sup>12</sup> and for city council members is around \$8,125,<sup>13</sup> as they are both considered part-time positions. In one example of a

# FUNDRAISING AS A BARRIER

*Were funding or financial resources a consideration in your decision to run?*



small average suburban city (less than 20,000 in population), a council member was expected to attend three, 2–3-hour council meetings in addition to 4-6 additional meetings per month; this does not include prep time and additional meetings with staff, constituents, or other social activities. In this example, the elected official spoke that the job can average up to 14 hours or more hours per week, in slow non-budget periods. Many of the interviewees spoke of the difficulty in balancing competing priorities, with these type of demands on their time.

A community member of color who has been asked to run said, “...the expectations of elected officials is beyond anything I could possibly fit in my life. I do not know (...) do they even get paid?”

Another feature of the current political environment is the influence of social media and its impact on candidates and elected officials. One elected official shared,

<sup>12</sup> Citizens League collected the current salary for 129 of the 182 municipalities and averaged the total salaries. A current database with specific information for all municipalities was not found.

<sup>13</sup> Same as above.

“Probably the hardest is the social media stuff where people are just uninformed, or they're just plain lying about you, throwing accusations out there that you can't respond to because you'll never win a battle on social media. I really don't pay attention to it. My wife did. She would get upset about it. I would tell her, no, don't pay attention to it. That's probably the most disheartening part of it, the stuff that goes on from social media, where people are just slandering your name.”

They sum up the atmosphere succinctly, “You need to have thick skin.”

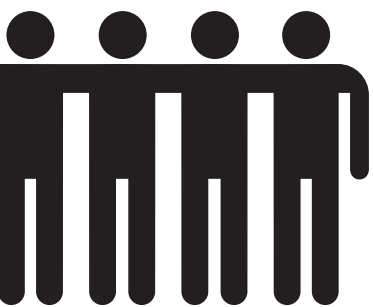
Issues around prejudice, safety and personal attacks were mentioned by many respondents, but were more predominant and frequent for Black, Indigenous, and candidates and elected officials of color (BIPOC candidates). For example, according to one candidate: “There were many challenges, but at the local level so much is changing. Those challenges can be overcome and what is nice about local government is that you do not need to run with a party. As a young woman of color I faced a lot of discrimination and fundraising challenges. There needs to be more diversity in public office and resources for people not independently wealthy.”

Another female BIPOC candidate reported, “I got threatening letters while running for council. I have also had threats against my family, my home, and myself.”

Yet another candidate shared, “It was hard to combat prejudiced groups that threatened me. It was challenging to wait all this time to feel like I was doing a good job. It is disheartening in the local council because it is so hard to sustain the lifestyle of a family, a full-time job, and the job as a council person.”

A respondent, when asked if they feel safe running for office, replied, “No - Online community groups get nasty and threatening. As an elected official I worry more.”

Another described the current political climate as “heated, intolerant, and hostile.”



#### **Theme Four: Seeking Nonpartisan Unity to Meet Community Needs through Transparency and Engagement**

Most candidates and elected officials, regardless of their own politics, were intent on making policy decisions centered on community needs and on unifying dialogues. They ensured this by participating in respectful listening sessions with their constituents and focusing on viable solutions. One respondent explained,

“People want to be validated and listened to, so I don't have to agree with their opinions, but I have to listen and be transparent. Discounting people doesn't do anything for progress.”

Another elected official shared, “It is important to be present and active in the community and explaining the reasoning behind policy decisions through information. Listening and explaining the why behind policies while correcting disinformation through transparency.”

One respondent described the unifying approach of local politics: “90% of the work I did had nothing to do with being a democrat. Most of what I did had to do with public service needs and public parks. At the local level people put party ID’s aside to focus on the needs of the community. The biggest policy action I encountered that was “democrat” was the (...) affordable housing project.”

A different individual said, “I try to avoid issues that will divide our city. In the local [government] this is possible because there are fewer polarizing issues. A divided community does not allow us to make effective policies and serve the community.”

Finally, one elected official discussed the need to build consensus across political divides: “I focus on building consensus. I always say I focus on the things we agree on, not the things we disagree on. It seems especially today, everyone wants to focus on where they have disagreements [and I think we should] fully concentrate on what we can get done and what we can do together. It’s about doing anything for our taxpayers, our residents.”



### **Theme Five: Running for and Staying in Office Correlates with Financial Stability and Balance**

Community members who were asked by multiple people to run, had concerns that aligned with sentiments of those elected officials leaving office. One community member of color who had been asked by multiple politically leaning organizations and community members to run stated, “I just do not know if I can survive financially,” which aligns with the reasoning of a current elected official that is stepping down because “there are a lot of

financial decisions that have to be made to stay in office, as it can be hard to balance two full time jobs.” Another elected official of color stepping down from office made a similar statement: “I love making a difference but there is no money in local government...I need to be in a space where I can work one job and be a mom.”

Another community member of color who had considered running for office mentioned that “having small children is a job on its own, not sure how (...) how I could add all the commitments”. And another current elected official of color stepping down from office stated, “having a newborn takes away a lot of time and life has drawn me away from the campaign.”

These experiences highlight the responsibilities and unique challenges facing individuals with full time jobs, and parents with young children, running for office or those considering a role in local government. The challenges were especially visible for those candidates of color. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the average age of those in office from our respondents was 53, which aligns with the demographics of leadership of government positions in Minnesota, in which only 19.1% in 2011-2015 were under 45 and only 4.5% leaders of color.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion and recommendations

The exploratory report was unique and first in many ways; we were able to dive into understanding the motivations of local candidates running for office in the Twin Cities metro area, staying in office, or stepping down from office, from a multi-partisan perspective. With the social and political dynamics that came in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd and the difficulties of living through COVID-19, understanding the experience of local government officials is critical to upholding good governance, democracy and is fundamental to improving representation and progress for local government. Some of the recommendations and conclusions below emerged from the analysis of candidate responses for future recommendations, along with our interpretation of the themes noted above.

### **Learning and mentoring programs are critical**

Local governments are a rare and special space for representative democracy due to the traditionally nonpartisan positions. Survey participants overwhelmingly responded concerning the value and need for mentoring at each phase of the elected office journey, and especially during the time of holding office.

**Recommendation:** Seek to create or support programs that keep politically, socially, and racially diverse candidates in office by providing pathways for learning and mentorship; support from fellow peers and former elected officials; and systematic support from their local government entities or nonprofit and good-governance organizations. A great example is the training programs for newly elected officials offered by the [League of Minnesota Cities](#), which offers both in-person and online learning opportunities.

### **Candidates need opportunities to build social capital**

Our analysis found that all candidates had well-developed social capital to run for office. Many had been encouraged in their social circles, by their peers, or by other elected officials. In preparing educational initiatives and programming to support early candidate planning for campaigning and holding office, it may be helpful to

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<sup>14</sup> From the Minnesota Compass article: [Who Leads in Minnesota?](#)

provide ideas and training for how candidates can network to build these valuable support systems as part of their preparation process.

**Recommendation:** Create and sustain nonpartisan support systems that build social capital for candidates interested in governing, who may not have current social capital and broad networks, or are early in their careers. The focus should be on connecting people beyond political parties. It could be an unofficial network of mentoring systems connecting elected officials and members of the community who are interested in becoming candidates.

### **Preserve the unique nonpartisan space of local government**

Local government is a rare space to focus on a wide variety of community issues. Some respondents in this study reported toxic polarization and threats as a barrier, but they also created pathways to getting things done locally. Community members, elected officials, and others all have a role in creating productive spaces for local government to thrive, and for a healthy democracy to prevail.

There is a difference between campaigning and governing. This is true at all levels of government, but especially so at the local level, where neighbors serve alongside neighbors to address community issues. Candidates, community members, and other leaders are encouraged to support elected officials beyond their campaign promises and gateway issues, to focus on governing around a wide variety of policy areas.

**Recommendation:** Encourage candidates and elected officials to approach hyper-partisanship with caution while still embracing gateway issues that emotionally draw people to engagement. Maintain the focus on localized policy issues that are within the scope, jurisdiction, and capacity of local government. Transparent communication and engagement as to those scopes, jurisdiction, and capacity is also critical for communities to understand the role of local government. Public figures must also denounce all forms of threats and intimidation as unacceptable and in conflict with healthy democracy, especially when it is done with intent to harm and intimidate those that are interested in serving.

### **Explore innovative financial and work-balance support systems**

The challenge of balancing work, personal, and social responsibilities while having a steady income to support campaigns and civic duties was a common theme among many of the candidates. It was also a major concern for those considering one day running for office.

**Recommendation:** Explore innovative structures that can support young, low income, and first-time candidates financially plan for their campaign and their life

as an elected official. Encourage municipalities to increase stipends for elected officials, especially if financial burdens are a constant barrier for those interested in running for office. This is particularly important in encouraging more candidates of color, and candidates from other under-represented groups, to run for and serve in elected office.

### **Continued research and data is needed**

In Minnesota, the demographic data available for local candidates is limited with self-reported basic information, and voluntary disclosure on political affiliation. There is a lack of centralized data and research about the demographics and experience of those running for and serving in local elected office. The limitations of concise and available data can make it difficult to compare candidate turnout, demographics, and geographic connections over long periods of time. This hinders understanding of the local government landscape and what individuals and organizations can do to support this space of governance.

**Recommendation:** Expand the research to collect the experience of candidates interested in running for office, staying in office, or stepping from local government consistently to analyze trends, opportunities, gaps, and barriers. Expand the research to other elected positions beyond the metro area and on different government levels like local, state, and federal.

## **Resources for those interested in serving in local government**

Candidates, and those interested in exploring local government service, are strongly encouraged to explore avenues for connection, networking, leadership development, and mentoring.

While this is not intended to be a complete list, some resources in Minnesota include:

- Secretary of State: [Become a Candidate](#)
- Legislative Coordinating Commission: [Who represents me?](#)
- [League of Minnesota Cities](#)
- Leadership opportunities through your local [Chamber of Commerce](#)
- Minnesota Compass: [Leadership programs directory](#)
- Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs: [Policy Fellows Program](#)
- [Nexus Community Partners](#), particularly the Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute
- Minnesota Department of Administration: [Bridging Divides](#)



## Addendum: Methods

The Citizens League hired an external researcher to analyze survey and interview responses. A mixed methods approach was used to gather data to inform this inquiry. For interviews, 43 candidates, prospective candidates, and elected officials were invited, out of which 14 accepted and agreed to a 60-minute semi-structured interview with two researchers. For the survey, we used a 40-question survey via Google forms, to which we had 65 respondents from the total pool of current elected city council members and mayors in the project area. The survey was modeled after the Comparative Candidates Survey<sup>15</sup> a multi-national survey that focuses on understanding the attitudes, beliefs, recruitment, issues, and ideology as well as democracy and representation.

To analyze the interview data, we conducted a cross-case analysis by initially transcribing all the interviews, and engaged in a preliminary round of open-coding. Then we used those initial coding categories to develop new analytic questions to re-examine the data to examine patterns and themes that show up based on categorical groupings of candidates based on responses to those analytic question categories. Based on those analytic questions we identified eight category areas that responses were grouped across. Finally, we examined patterns within those category area responses to identify themes that provided nuance and relevance to our initial set of inquiry areas. We also open coded survey open response questions, and then used the above categories to group those coded sections of the data into our eight category areas to gather additional evidence, nuance, and counter narratives.

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<sup>15</sup>[The Comparative Candidate Survey \(CCS\)](#)

## Acknowledgements

Citizens League is one of many organizations in Minnesota that strive to support civic life and public engagement. We are grateful to all who dedicate themselves to this work. We look forward to exploring the next steps that may emerge from this project.

Thank you to everyone who responded to the survey or participated in an interview for this project. Thank you for sharing your voice. We hope you find this report helpful and useful for continued conversations about one of civic life's core tenets of serving in office.

And thank you, of course, to all who run for and serve in public elected office. Our communities are better and stronger because of you.

*If you have run for a local elected position, or served in such a role, or considered doing so, we invite your feedback and insights [here](#).*

### **Project team:**

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