

YOUTHFUL HOPE SHINES AMID LOW VOTER TURNOUT

YOUNG PEOPLE MAY HOLD KEY TO STRONGER VOTER ENGAGEMENT

BAMBANG SADEWO
bsadewo@metroland.com

The success of some young people running for office — and those behind the scenes — emerged as a bright spot in Halton's municipal elections; however, challenges remain when it comes to voter turnout.

The number of eligible voters who cast their ballot dropped in all four Halton municipalities — including Halton Hills at 28.09 per cent (down from 29.42 per cent in 2018), 27.22 per cent in Burlington (down from 39.79 per cent), Milton with 28.99 per cent (down from 37 per cent) and Oakville at 28.3 per cent (37 per cent in 2018).

Peter Graefe, a political-science professor at McMaster University, said a number of factors could be contributing to the declining numbers for municipal elections, including difficulty of voters to get information, less media coverage for local campaigns and the absence of political party banners to help simplify choices.

The particularly low turnout in some regions could also speak to something more profound, he suggested, where people

may feel they have no capacity to change things with their vote, completely disempowered, or disconnected from their political communities.

Those who may help bolster engagement among young people in north Halton — and ultimately boost voter turnout — are councillor-elects Joseph Racinsky (Halton Hills) and Adil Khalqi (Milton).

While admitting that his age came up on occasion during the election campaign, 20-year-old Racinsky felt his passion likely struck a chord with some voters.

"If they wanted someone with energy and enthusiasm, that's why people voted for me. If age was a concern, they probably didn't," he said.

Khalqi, 22, said that he's committed to "ensuring that young people have the ability to be part of institutions and organizations that shape long-term decision-making, and are in charge of serving the community."

"Being a young person would add value to council and fill in a perspective that is not too common in council. Diverse representation matters," he said.

Going into the race, Kirsten Kelly, 19, who won a seat on Halton Catholic District School Board (HCDSB) for Burlington Wards 1 and 2, realized that facing off against an incumbent was "an uphill battle."



Graham Paine/Metroland

Kirsten Kelly says age shouldn't deter someone from running in an election.

The former student trustee for HCDSB put all efforts into the campaign, while being cognizant of the low turnout in past elections.

"I knew that I had to go door-to-door more and urge (people) to vote on election day," said the University of Waterloo undergraduate student, noting that the use of social media was also instrumental in encouraging youth engagement.

"It's (voting) not as big a priority for young people, which I do find unfortunate," Kelly said.

This sentiment was echoed by Shyan Hayder, who, at just 17, managed the campaign of Nav Nanda for

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- Peter Graefe, political-science professor, McMaster University

Ward 7 town and regional councillor in Oakville — and helped her defeat the incumbent by more than 500 votes.

The Grade 12 student at White Oaks Secondary School has been involved in

election campaigns at all levels for years. With many of his peers finding politics boring, he said, having more young candidates and volunteers would motivate them to be more involved in politics and local issues.

"You have to create a chain," he said. "That's how it starts."

Graefe cautioned that if people don't practise their voting rights, and the dismal turnout trend continues, "chances are they'll see their municipal governments become less and less important institutions and more and more powers will get exercised at the level of the provincial government."

One way to encourage greater political participation is to create a sense of belonging in communities.

"There's more community building that has to be done where people actually feel that we're a community and we can make decisions together and those decisions can make a difference," he said.

Trustee-elect Kelly hopes that more people, regardless of age, would see the importance of municipal elections and how "it impacts the smallest issues in our life," while Hayder — a political aficionado — encourages parents to keep an open mind and allow their kids to get involved in politics.

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: Amid an especially low voter turnout in Halton's municipal elections, we wanted to examine a potential bright spot and how that could help bolster young voter engagement in the future.

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