

Click/Hear Quick Take

# **Our Voices Matter: Food Bank Client Election Priorities**

June 2023



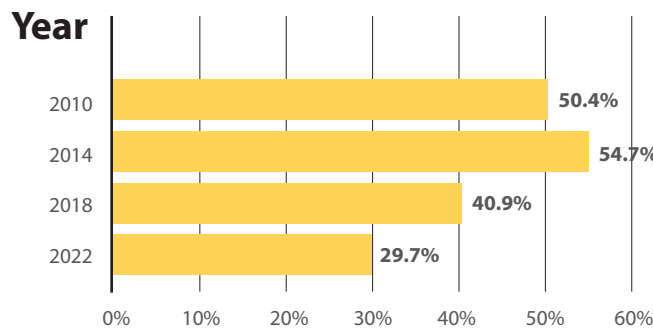
**Daily Bread**  
Food Bank

# Background

On June 26, 2023 Torontonians will elect a new Mayor. This is an important opportunity to shape the direction and priorities of City Council, whose jurisdiction includes affordable housing, public transit, parks and recreation, homelessness services, public libraries, and much more.

Despite the important role played by the municipal government, voter turnout in municipal elections has historically been quite low, as demonstrated in the table below. With 102 candidates currently running for Mayor and no incumbent in the race, we may see higher than average voter turn-out this election, making it critically important for candidates to engage with a wide array of constituents.

**Voter Turnout in Toronto<sup>1</sup>**



Much of the research conducted to date concludes that low-income residents are less likely to vote in national elections.<sup>2</sup> Researchers analyzing Toronto elections in 2003, 2006, and 2010 found that there was a wide range of voter turnout rates across wards, with lower voter turnout in wards with higher concentrations of low-income households, racialized individuals, and immigrants.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, this study found that homeowners were not more likely to vote than tenants, as many commonly assumed to be the case.

Despite the research base, in our experience of doing voter engagement work directly with food bank clients, we found that low-income Torontonians were in fact highly engaged in politics. We wanted to find out: How likely are food bank clients to vote? What are the issues that matter most to them this election?

## Methodology

Through the Click/Hear program, Daily Bread maintains a client panel to stay connected with people who use food banks and to engage in discussions about the daily challenges they face. The Click/Hear panel is built from food bank clients who have expressed their desire to participate in Daily Bread's research and advocacy activities. Regular short surveys are sent out, gathering responses by at least two methods: email, phone, and in-person. In the latest survey, 101 respondents participated.

## Overview of Findings

### *Highly Engaged Voters*

Three-quarters of food bank client respondents (73%) indicated that they are eligible to vote. Among these respondents, an astounding 95% responded that they were intending to vote in the mayoral by-election. This result directly contradicts the typical assumption made that low-income residents, and particularly renters, are less likely to vote.

When asked why they were planning to vote, food bank clients discussed four key reasons:

**1** **Voting is a right and an important component of democracy**

**2** **Voting ensures that you can select strong representation that reflects your values and priorities**

**3** **Voting helps move the needle on issues that matter the most**

**4** **Voting is a way for your voice to be heard**

On the flipside, for the 28% who indicated that they were not planning to vote, their reasons were consistent: politicians don't keep their promises, and nothing ever changes.

We can compare this to Statistics Canada who analyzed voting patterns in the 2021 federal election. They found the top reason for not voting among all eligible voters was not being interested in politics.<sup>4</sup> For seniors, the top barrier was illness or disability, and for those aged 35-44, the top reason was being too busy.<sup>5</sup> Our research results, as well as our on the ground experience, indicates that food bank clients are in fact quite politically engaged, but over time a proportion have become disillusioned with politics after being continuously marginalized throughout their lives.

While this panel of food bank clients did not bring up barriers to voting, it is important to recognize that these barriers do exist and threaten the democratic participation of many residents. Among Canadians who were eligible to vote in 2021, 7% did not because of barriers, including not being able to prove identity or address, lacking information about the voting process, or having issues travelling to a polling station.<sup>6</sup>

## ***Voter Priorities***

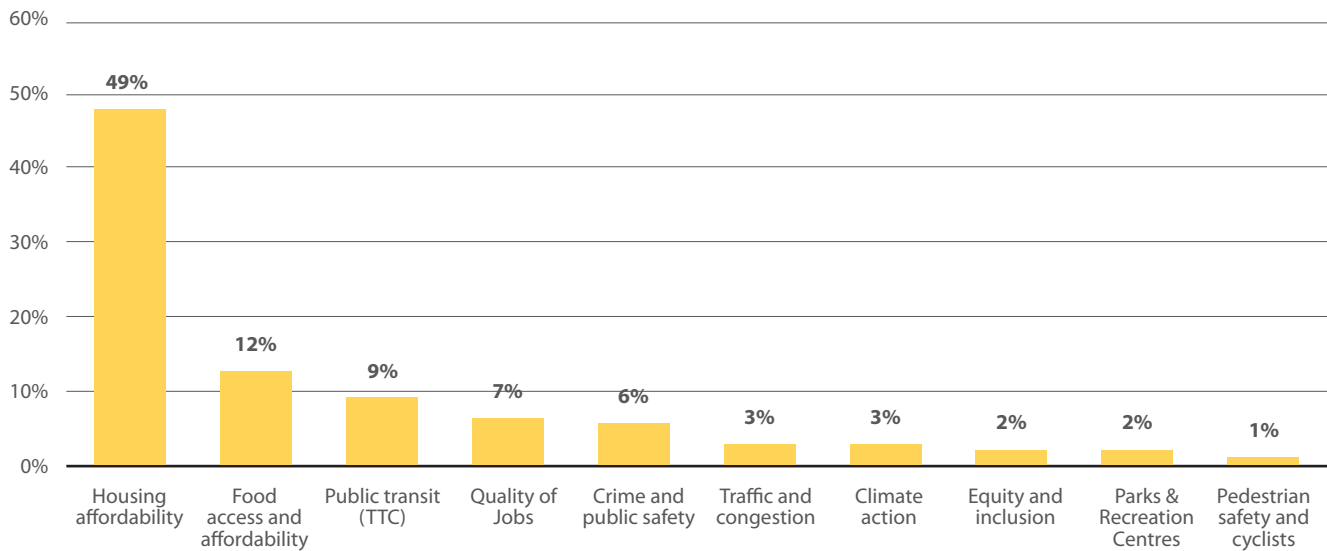
When asked about the number one issue the new Mayor should prioritize, survey respondents overwhelmingly listed housing as their top priority, followed by food access and affordability, and public transit.

This comes as no surprise when we consider that the average rent of a one-bedroom apartment listed in Toronto in May 2023 was \$2,538.<sup>7</sup> Our 2022 Who's Hungry report reveals that 69% of food bank clients are spending at least half of their income on housing, and an additional 18% are paying all of their income on housing costs. It is undeniable that Toronto is in the midst of a long-running and worsening housing crisis. Skyrocketing housing costs, stagnant incomes, and a dwindling number of affordable units have all contributed to rising housing precarity and increased strain on Toronto's social housing and shelter systems.

Similarly, the cost of food continues to rise, with grocery inflation reaching 9.1% in April,<sup>8</sup> the 12th consecutive month with inflation above 9%. While Toronto has an abundance of supermarkets, not all residents have easy access to affordable, nutritious, culturally relevant food options in their neighborhood.

Close to 70% of food bank clients rely on public transit to access food programs, and so affordability and service levels are critically tied to food insecurity in the city. The Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) is the least subsidized transit system in North America, recouping 70% of its cost from riders. Recently, TTC service was reduced on 57 bus routes, the Bloor-Danforth subway line, and the St. Clair streetcar due to budgetary constraints resulting from lower ridership since the pandemic.<sup>9</sup> Looming service cuts and potential fare increases can lead to worsening food insecurity in Toronto.

## Top issue that the new mayor should prioritize



### Food Bank Client Top Priorities

1. Housing affordability
2. Food access and affordability
3. Public transit

### General Public Top Priorities (Forum Research)<sup>10</sup>

1. Housing affordability
2. Cost of living and inflation
3. City infrastructure, service and taxes

## Policy Implications

Our research demonstrates that food bank clients are in fact highly engaged in the mayoral election, and their voices should not be discounted. This election, Daily Bread will be looking to see the following policy priorities reflected in candidates' platforms:

1. Significantly increase the number of affordable and deeply affordable rental housing units being developed, protect and maintain the stock of existing rental units, and support tenants through eviction prevention programs.

2. Support food access by ensuring that community food programs have access to affordable, accessible space and invest in resiliency of community food programs so they can continue to provide services in case of an extreme weather event or public health crisis.
3. Ensure TTC service is affordable and reliable, by expanding the Fair Pass program to all low-income residents and ensuring all areas of the City, particularly the inner suburbs, have reliable TTC services.

It is critical that candidates provide realistic costing and identify the revenue streams that will fund initiatives. With the city facing a significant budgetary deficit, it will take considerable leadership by the next Mayor to identify funding opportunities beyond federal and provincial funding, such as leveraging property taxes, a commercial parking levy, vacant homes tax, luxury home tax, etc.

Toronto needs bold leadership to tackle growing food insecurity and inequality. On June 26, 2023, it is important that everyone who is eligible casts their vote to build a city where everyone can thrive.

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall, S. (2023, March 7). Election: Voter turnout in 2022. Spacing. <http://spacing.ca/toronto/2023/03/07/election-voter-turnout-in-2022/#:~:text=In%202010%2C%20the%20year%20Rob,further%2C%20to%20just%2029.7%20percent>

<sup>2</sup> Elections Canada. (2020, May 12). Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-voters. <https://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=rec/part/tud&document=correlates&lang=e>

<sup>3</sup> Siemiatycki, M., & Marshall, S. (2014). Who Votes in Toronto Municipal Elections? Maytree. [https://maytree.com/wp-content/uploads/Who\\_Votes-final.pdf](https://maytree.com/wp-content/uploads/Who_Votes-final.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada. (2022, February 16). Reasons for not voting in the federal election, September 20, 2021. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220216/dq220216d-eng.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Rentals.ca. (2023). Rentals.ca May 2023 Rent Report. <https://rentals.ca/national-rent-report>

<sup>8</sup> Statistics Canada . (2023, May 16). Consumer Price Index, April 2023. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/230516/dq230516a-eng.htm?indid=3665-1&indgeo=0>

<sup>9</sup> TTCriders. (n.d.). Our Work. <https://www.ttcriders.ca/ourwork>

<sup>10</sup> Forum Research. (2023). News Release . <https://poll.forumresearch.com/data/bd46aa03-810b-450a-a9585e01830e3c72Chow%20remains%20first%20choice%20in%20mayor%20race%20May%2015%202023.pdf>

# Why is voting important to you?

**I recognize the privilege afforded to me by civil rights activists in the past. I will not let their trials and traumas go in vain. I value the choice to be able to vote in a Democratic environment**

**Municipal elections are the core of democracy, dealing with the issues that most directly affect your communities and your ability to be an active and contributing member**

**To elect a mayor who will help the common person who is struggling**

**For CHANGE**

**It's an opportunity to have personal issues represented and addressed**

**It is my duty as a citizen**

**All voices matter, representation, public policy changes lives**

**I want to be a part of the decision-making process**

**Because it hopefully elects the right person for the job**



# If you could say one thing to the next Mayor of Toronto, what would it be?

Even people who aren't considered low income are worried about not being able to afford their rent. ODSP rates only being \$14000/year for me, I would have to leave the city if I lost my apartment for some reason, losing all my health services in the process

Remember and deliver your promises

Create more opportunities for immigrants

Help homeless persons with housing, people are dying outside, change starts with a home

The poorer a person is, the harder it is for that person to do anything. Relieve the cumulative disadvantage burdening the poor, and far more people will have the ability to make greater contributions to society.

Answer your phone messages and letters

Safety and housing should be the #1 priority



**Please help us with housing, the rents need to be reduced, it's very hard to afford, also food prices are increasing. We also need help in dental cares which is also expensive. TTC has also raised the fair. All the expenses keep increasing which is very hard**

**Homelessness is not an individual's failure, but rather the failure of society, and is laying at the feet of our governments on all levels**

**Work more, talk less**

**Make housing and food more accessible and affordable**

**Be fair and focus on equity**

**Because it hopefully elects the right person for the job**

**I would ask for better job programs to get the unemployed working again so that they can enjoy the dignity and respect that they deserve**





# This election, make your voice heard



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