

Getting Involved In Politics: Yes You Can—And Should

Recently, I wrote an article published in the UofT Magazine (Summer 2010 issue) called [“Where are the Women?”](#) lamenting the shortage of women in politics. The response to the article has been fantastic. We need more women involved in the political process, for the reasons I mentioned in the original article, and I am really excited that so many people have responded, expressing interest in getting involved. Many have asked for more advice on running for public office. Many have also asked for advice on, not necessarily running for office, but in getting involved politically in other ways. The overwhelming response has prompted me to do a follow-up piece, with more specific recommendations on how to go about it. Note that I encourage men AND women to become more involved, so guys—feel free to use this too.

One comment I’d really like to make first: Quite often (including in several responses to the UofT article) people (*particularly* women) will say, “I don’t have the right education”, or “I don’t have the right experience”, or “I don’t have a thick-enough skin”. *Nonsense*. A full 1/3 of Canadian MPs do not have a university degree—but some of those people are the best MPs, because they have extraordinarily valuable practical experience. I can think of a couple of farmers, for example, who do great work in Parliament. Who better to know what so many women face than someone who has multi-tasked her way through raising kids and keeping a household, while holding down a job to pay the bills? Who knows better the challenges facing the thousands of new immigrants coming to Canada than people who have been through that experience? Who better to understand the pressing needs of innovation and entrepreneurship, and the challenges facing small and medium businesses, than people with business experience? The Canadian government needs to both understand and represent Canadians, and their diversity—that means people with a variety of educational and experiential backgrounds not only can, but should, get involved.

Another comment is that many people feel that politics is somehow the realm of elites, or cliques, and that you need to have connections in order to get involved. *Nonsense to that, too*. The political process is far more accessible, and easy to start participating in, than even I thought when I started. But you need to start somewhere, and I hope this article helps.

Whether you decide to run for public office, or decide that you can be more effectively and happily engaged in other ways, I cannot encourage you enough. It can be immensely satisfying—frustrating at times, too, believe me (!)—but ultimately very rewarding. I hope that the following is useful in either case. The more you know about how the system works, the more you learn, the more people you get to know who are already involved, the better armed you will be to determine what form of engagement in politics is best for you.

ASK YOURSELF SOME QUESTIONS. What order of government interests you? (ⁱSee below for a brief description of federal, provincial and municipal.) If federal or provincial, what Party do you want to belong to? How much time do you have to contribute? What issues are you most interested in? Which MPs, MPPs/MLAs, municipal councilors do you like or admire? Why? Which ones do you not respect as much, and why not? The answers will help you decide where to focus your efforts, and with whom.

JOIN A PARTY. Although not necessary for municipal politics, this is a fundamental part of both federal and provincial politics. These are links to the main federal parties: [Liberal](http://www.liberal.ca/), [Conservative](http://www.conservative.ca/), [NDP](http://www.ndp.ca/), [Green](http://greenparty.ca/), <http://greenparty.ca/> Each one of these web sites will help you find what electoral district (riding) you live in, and gives instructions on how to join the party and the relevant riding association. You may want to get involved somewhere other than the riding where you live, if you happen to like an MP or MPP/MLA elsewhere, or you know some of the people already involved elsewhere. There is no requirement, even to run for office, that you actually live in the riding that you focus your efforts on, although it helps to have some kind of connection. (We have quite a few party members and volunteers in Willowdale who don't actually live in the riding—we welcome all comers ☺.)

VOLUNTEER. It's the best way to get to know the people, the system, the processes, what works and what doesn't. For example, we welcome volunteers to our constituency office. Some come up to 5 days a week because they happen to have the time and interest. Some can only contribute a couple of hours here and there. We welcome all involvement, large or small, because it's a great way for anyone to learn what really goes on in an MP's office at the constituency level, which is very much focused on the community and the needs of people in their dealings with government. We also welcome volunteers in our Ottawa office. Despite the fact that it sometimes gets pretty crowded with interns and volunteers in addition to staff, we love it, and like to describe the office as “cosy”. The work there is very different than in the constituency, but it's great exposure for those interested in the more legislative, Parliamentary aspects of an MP's job. I strongly encourage anyone to contact the office of a sitting politician that you think you'd like to learn from, and offer to help out. (There's not enough room here to link to all of the provinces, territories and municipalities, but you can find them on their web sites. Here is a list of all of the federal [MPs](http://webinfo.parl.gc.ca/MembersOfParliament/MainMPsCompleteList.aspx?TimePeriod=Current&Language=E) : <http://webinfo.parl.gc.ca/MembersOfParliament/MainMPsCompleteList.aspx?TimePeriod=Current&Language=E>). You can learn a great deal (particularly if you ask lots of questions) about what is involved. From a political and campaign side, volunteer for the riding association (contact information for most individual riding associations is on the relevant party website). Almost everyone is looking for new people, and there's always something to do, whether it's related to policy, membership activities, fundraising (yes, that's a big part of politics, too), and campaigning. Some of us do occasional door-knocking even when there is no campaign—it can be fun and a good opportunity to see how it works. (It's not nearly as scary as some people worry---almost everyone who answers the door is actually happy to see you there and to share with you their views.)

RUN FOR PUBLIC OFFICE. Actually running for public office is a big step, but I strongly encourage everyone to at least consider it—particularly after you've taken the time to learn and experience what you might be getting into. My first answer to the question, “How do we get more women in Parliament?” is to say we need, quite simply, more women to run.

If you are interested, please visit Martha's blog “who, what, when, where and how” tips:

WHO? Realistically, the elected, public side of politics is not for everyone. It can be immensely rewarding. It can also be pretty demanding—it is NOT a 9 to 5 job. Particularly where the legislature is in a different city, requiring travel and time away from home, it can be a huge personal commitment. It is more of a challenge for those who have family or other obligations (young children, older parents, etc.) It is easier to do if you are financially stable, and if you either do not have other responsibilities, or they are behind you (i.e. kids have grown up), or you otherwise have the necessary independence, flexibility and/or family support.

WHAT? It's not rocket science, but it does require a lot of hard work—and others to support you, so you'll need to encourage others to help. There are various “campaign college” texts and seminars out there. One I recommend, geared to aspiring women politicians (but useful for men too), has been prepared by Equal Voice: <http://gettingtothegate.com/> There are also lots of people to ask for advice—don't hesitate.

WHEN? Timing will depend on your availability, family and other commitments. But there are many other factors, such as when is the next election? What party do you want to run for? What constituency do you want to represent? Is there an incumbent? But even if there is no immediate opening where you are interested, there is no time like the present to get involved—to learn, to make connections, network, and prepare for a nomination campaign and full candidacy further down the road.

WHERE? Where you run will depend on a number of factors. Although in most cases you don't technically have to live where you run, it usually is the place where you live, work, or otherwise have a connection. You might choose a different jurisdiction due to incumbency (i.e. no opening), or because someone else is already heavily favoured in a nomination battle. Realistically, “winnability” is also a factor. Of course, the winds of political fortune can shift dramatically, and I always encourage people to run. Regardless of success, it is an extraordinary experience—and it often takes more than one campaign to succeed.

HOW? If you haven't already, do your homework on levels of government, jurisdictions, issues, current politicians and electoral history. Second, get involved with someone who has already done it. If provincial or federal, join the local riding association of the party you've chosen, and volunteer to help out—it's the best way to get to know the people who are already involved. And volunteer for a campaign—in so doing, expose yourself to all aspects—door-knocking, phone-calling, data entry, brochures, lawn signs, assisting the candidate with debates, getting the vote out, etc. And ask questions! It's all great learning for when you take the plunge yourself.

ⁱ *In the rather unique federation that is Canada, various areas of governance are dealt with at different levels under our Constitution. What follows is a very general, certainly not exhaustive, description—and there is significant jurisdictional overlap in some of these areas. (For a pretty good summary, see [Wikipedia on Canadian Federalism](#).)*

The federal government is responsible for: the macro-economics of the country, money and banking; foreign affairs and trade; significant aspects of the environment; the military and defence; various other activities that transcend provincial boundaries, such as national transport (air, rail, sea, national highways) and Canada Post; Aboriginal issues; fisheries and oceans; criminal law; employment insurance and the Canada Pension Plan; the national Health Act; intellectual property; citizenship and immigration—you get the idea. The federal Parliament consists of 308 Members of Parliament, almost all of whom belong to a

specific political Party. The Government is formed by the Party with the greatest number of elected MPs, and the Leader of that Party becomes the Prime Minister (he/she is NOT elected directly by the people). The Official Opposition is the Party that has the next-largest number of elected MPs.

The provincial governments are responsible for property and civil rights, including consumer protection; education; delivery of health care; welfare; the administration of justice (most of the court system); natural resources and the environment. They are elected in a similar way to the federal government, on Party lines.

Municipal governments are responsible for the direct needs of the community, such as water, sewage, garbage collection, public transit, land use planning, libraries, emergency services such as fire-fighting. Increasingly, particularly in larger urban centres, municipal governments find themselves burdened with many issues not originally set out as municipal responsibilities, such as settlement challenges for new immigrant, and affordable housing. Municipal politics are not (officially at any rate) conducted along partisan lines, and you don't need to join any particular political party to be involved or run for office. (This is very attractive to many who want to be involved politically, based on issues, but who are uncomfortable with partisan politics.)