

Search beyond name recognition

Margaret Bird - January 2026

What's in a name?

This phrase has two main interpretations: that a name is insignificant and doesn't define a person or thing's true nature, or that a name is deeply significant, carrying meaning, history, and identity. The first view comes from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, where Juliet argues that the name "Montague" doesn't change the essence of Romeo. The second perspective, however, emphasizes that names can reflect aspirations, family history, or cultural identity, and can be a significant part of a person's self-perception, as seen in certain cultural traditions or family business names. The latter being the most important when selecting candidates to vote for in our municipal elections.

Today this is used to signify that a person's name is just a label -- not defined by his family's name. The saying is commonly used to mean that a thing's essence or quality remains unchanged, regardless of its name.

At its core, the phrase suggests that the name or label given to something is not as important as its intrinsic nature.

In modern usage, the adage is used to express that the true worth of something is not dependent on its name. For example, a person's character or a product's quality is more important than the title or brand associated with it.

So, when it comes to municipal elections, why do the voters put so much importance in name recognition instead of finding out about the political candidates' reputation, background, education, experience, views and opinions, expertise and achievements? Voters are never slow in complaining about election results, so why not think more carefully about why and how they're voting, and who they're voting for? Everyone is in such a hurry to get to their local polling station and find names they recognize, in five minutes – why?

In a study by Tessier & Blanchet in the Canadian Journal of Political Science, it suggests that the order in which municipal candidates' names appear on ballots can have an impact on how many votes they receive — particularly when they don't have the party affiliations that help signal to voters where they stand on the issues. If your last name is Andreychuk, you might want to consider running for municipal office. But if it's Zalapski, you might want to keep your hat out of the ring.

It was found that a municipal candidate without a party affiliation whose name appeared lower on an alphabetically-arranged ballot did significantly worse than candidates nearer the top. In dozens of cases, the effect may have been enough to spell the difference between victory and defeat.

In provincial and federal elections, political parties send strong signals to the electorate. Voters may not be familiar with their local candidates, but party affiliations make the choice simpler.

Parties receive widespread media coverage and have longstanding policy positions, so voters don't necessarily need to closely follow a federal or provincial election campaign to be informed enough to make up their minds.

Municipal elections are different. Candidates have no party affiliations in most Canadian municipal elections, except Montreal, Quebec City and Vancouver, but even in some of those jurisdictions the 'parties' are little more than vehicles for mayoral candidates.

Tessier and Blanchet wrote, "Municipal elections are characterized by almost no party cues and much less visibility. These elections ask for a little more effort from voters compared to provincial elections." And, "In this more demanding setting, our results show signs of ballot order effect, indicating that this small increase in complexity has an important impact on voting behaviour."

The fact that ballot order in provincial elections had no impact at all on how the candidates did — suggests that, in municipal elections, party affiliation would offer voters a helpful shorthand guide to policy positions.

In other words, the letter those candidates' surnames started with might have been the reason they failed to win — even though it's hardly a relevant factor for judging their suitability for office.

Tessier & Blanchet wrote that a healthy democratic process "assumes that people are voting for the candidates they prefer, which entails that they actually have meaningful preferences to begin with."

The next Municipal Election is October 2026. Has city hall done their homework? Has any emphasis been placed on building voters' confidence in the municipal-election process? Has the MPAC and city list of names and addresses all been accurately updated and made into a living list in readiness?

Cities across Ontario are facing unprecedented housing, transit, and infrastructure challenges at a time when turnout for municipal elections is abysmal — hovering at an average of 36 per cent in the last election cycle.

At the same time, policies ensuring the integrity of these elections needs updating to keep up with the

changing landscape of local election-campaign strategies.

Canada's voting system isn't immune to interference. Our federal elections still use paper ballots, which is a major advantage as it's not so easy to hack the process when using the current voting process where the electors are voting in person, at the polling station, without any digital devices.

The electoral process, by which city officials are elected, matters to how cities are governed and, ultimately, how the interests of citizens are served. So, let's be determined to be part of the 2026 municipal process where we do our homework on researching the candidates, so that we don't vote by name alone, and make sure that the eligible-voter turnout is 100 per cent.