

# OTR Podcast Transcript S8E3

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Municipal politics, city budget, mayor's power, voter turnout, city council meetings, community involvement, petitions, public consultations, media attention, advocacy organizations, progressive policies, training sessions, social media, democratic process, city hall.

## SPEAKERS

Speaker 1, Jaden Whitelaw, Deputation, Matt Elliot, Anish Dhupar, Streeter 3, Streeter 5, Saman Tabasinejad, Streeter 4, Streeter 2, Streeter 1

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**A** Anish Dhupar 00:00  
Hi. Welcome back to the On The Record podcast. I'm Anish Dhupar.

**J** Jaden Whitelaw 00:10  
And I'm Jaden Whitelaw. This semester, we're doing things a bit differently for our podcast.

**S** Streeter 3 00:15  
We're focusing on municipal politics in the GTA, from

**J** Jaden Whitelaw 00:19  
who controls the city budget, to how the mayor's power is different from that of their councilors,

**S** Streeter 3 00:24

to any questions you want us to answer about local politics, email at us, at [ontherecordnews@torontomu.ca](mailto:ontherecordnews@torontomu.ca)

**J** Jaden Whitelaw 00:31

today's big question is, how can a resident influence city politics?

**A** Anish Dhupar 00:36

a regular citizen like you or me, not a union leader, not a councilor, just a regular voting Torontonian.

**J** Jaden Whitelaw 00:42

In this episode, we will hear from Matt Elliot, a freelance journalist who specializes in municipal politics, and Saman Tabasinejad, the executive director of progress Toronto, a city hall advocacy organization, about their perspectives on how residents can make an influence in city politics. We will also hear from TMU students, however, they can make an impact on city hall. To understand how constituents can influence city politics, let's start with some context.

**S** Streeter 3 01:11

The City of Toronto is the largest city in Canada, home to roughly 2.8 million people as of the latest complete census, and recent estimates suggest that number is climbing toward 3.3 million by 2025 26

**J** Jaden Whitelaw 01:25

now of those millions people, 18 and older Canadian citizens living in the city and properly registered on the municipal voters list are eligible to vote

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Streeter 3 01:34

in the 2022, Toronto municipal election. There are about 1.8 9 million eligible voters. But here's the thing, only about 30 to 40% of those eligible voters actually turned out to vote in recent municipal elections, a level of participation that's been historically low compared to federal or provincial elections.

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Jaden Whitelaw 01:53

That's a big number, which means decisions about transit, development, housing, parks and city budgets are not representative of the whole population,

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Streeter 3 02:03

so if most residents aren't voting, and turnout fluctuates year to year, how else can everyday people influence city politics?

J

Jaden Whitelaw 02:11

Well before discussing this, let's hear what some people our age have to say about this question. Our producers, Gabriel Hilty and Mia Di Panfilo, went around the TMU campus and ask students if they could influence city politics and decision making.

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Streeter 1 02:25

I think as an individual, people hold a lot of power in what they choose to do and how they decide, even to like, what are the choices that you're making every day. And I think the power becomes even stronger when everyone decides that they also have the power to and like, as a collective, we work together, I

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Streeter 2 02:42

would say I can through signing petitions, participating in protests, even social media, especially with like the youth, is a really good way to spread awareness and information. And then also, we have the ability to like email members of the government.

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Streeter 3 02:59

Me, personally, I do think, yeah, that, like individuals can influence politics and decision making, but I think you got to start at like a really small level. Like, I really think actually, like smaller organizations, like sports and stuff like that are a like, children's sports are a good way to kind of get in with the community

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Streeter 4 03:20

as an individual. I think yes, you can, but you have to be really involved, and you have to be willing to, you know, form that sort of community, and, you know, band together, I guess, to actually, like, make a change, actively, put yourself out there, go to Events.

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Streeter 5 03:36

Personally, I think that I could, in some form, not much, but I'm kind of like a content creator, like I make like music, but if I were supposed to involve my music with politics, then I think I could somehow spread a message around City of Toronto.

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Streeter 3 03:55

So we heard mixed answers from students. Some were more confident than others in saying how they can influence city politics, but not a true, definitive answer.

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Jaden Whitelaw 04:04

Outside the OTR newsroom, we posted a question, can you as a regular citizen and a student influence city politics? Of the 80 responses we received, 74% said, no, they cannot influence city politics or decision making as a student. Anish, are you of the same opinion as them?

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Streeter 3 04:23

I believe we as individuals can have a huge influence on politics. I feel like even if you want to get involved right now, you can. I personally got interested in politics from the show Parks and Recreation, seeing how involved the community can be with the local government and make a change, even if it's a show, can kickstart a huge interest. Jaden, what do you know about influence city politics?

**J** Jaden Whitelaw 04:44

Well, apart from voting, I figured we could contact our city councilor and maybe attend meetings, but in terms of influencing decisions made at city hall, I thought that would be a long shot for residents, but to my surprise, we can have a big say in municipal politics.

**S** Streeter 3 05:00

You're absolutely right. Jaden, let's get into how residents can really influence city politics.

**J** Jaden Whitelaw 05:05

So one of the most direct ways to participate in city politics is by attending your city council or committee meetings, which are generally open to the public. By law, regular meetings are scheduled publicly posted, and you can walk in or often watch online. There are only limited exceptions to the rule that a meeting be open to the public, usually for legal or confidential reasons, such as discussions about real estate deals or personal information.

**S** Speaker 1 05:30

You will see a series of motions that is in front of you, one very simple one, which is a group of Councilors that are opting into this to allow retail to open up in their area.

**S** Streeter 3 05:50

Another way that you can access city politics beyond the council is by getting in contact with the councilor in your ward. You can look up Ward boundaries and your local councilor on the City of Toronto website. Do you know your counselor?

**J** Jaden Whitelaw 06:01

Jaden, I actually do not know my counselor. And what about you?

**S** Streeter 3 06:05

Actually, I do, since I live in Oakville and around the Bronte area, mine is Sean O'Meara,

**J** Jaden Whitelaw 06:11

okay, I guess this is definitely a sign for me to research who my counselor is.

**S** Streeter 3 06:16

At City Hall, residents can do more than just sit and listen. You can register in advance to make a short presentation called the deputation to a committee that's reviewing a particular issue. It's typically a few minutes to speak your mind, explain why a policy matters to you and suggest changes.

**J** Jaden Whitelaw 06:32

Now these deputations are usually listed on the meeting agenda, included in the official public record, and often broadcast live or archived for future reference. This is one of the most direct ways an everyday person can influence policy before councilors vote on it. Please go ahead. You have five minutes.

**D** Deputation 06:51

Good afternoon. Chair, Myers, councilors and commissioners, my name is Giselle, Angelica Gerardo. I'm a proud transit rider. I'm speaking today in support of this budget that prioritizes affordability, reliability and accessibility for all.

**S** Streeter 3 07:06

If speaking in public isn't your style, you can submit written comments to any agenda item. These submissions become part of the public record too, and councilors will have them when they make decisions.

**J** Jaden Whitelaw 07:16

You can even go further by signing or organizing a petition on a specific issue, like zoning changes or traffic policies, for example, and submitting it to the city clerk or council member, which makes your community's voice visible to decision makers.

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Streeter 3 07:32

One challenge for residents trying to influence local politics is media attention, or the lack thereof.

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Jaden Whitelaw 07:37

In many cities, including Toronto, there are fewer dedicated City Hall reporters than in decades past, local media resources have shrunk, and beats that once covered Council on a regular basis may not only surface for major issues. That means residents often have to pay closer attention themselves through direct attendance newsletters, social media feeds from counselors, community groups and civic tech platforms.

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Streeter 3 08:03

Our producer, Gabriel Hilty managed to score an interview with Matt Elliot, a Toronto based freelance, contributing columnist for The Toronto Star who focuses on municipal politics. He had asked him if he had noticed a change in the city council meeting attendance.

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Matt Elliot 08:17

Yeah, yeah. I mean, that's it sort of ebbed and flowed over the years, but like, a formative experience for me was, you know, I came to City Hall as a journalist when Rob Ford was the mayor of Toronto, and that was a very turbulent time in the city. We had a mayor that was, you know, always embroiled in some kind of scandal. Hey, it

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Matt Elliot 08:49

like that kind of governance, government where you know, literally just you know, 100, 100 plus people can you know, shape and make councilors and the mayor. Listen, you know, that kind of thing doesn't really happen at the other levels, because there are no formal party, political parties locally. You know, you have this feeling before every council meeting where it's like, I wonder how that votes going to go. I wonder what Council is going to do on this. Because, you know, you will sort of see up close the messy way that governments work.

**J** Jaden Whitelaw 09:26

This change places more responsibility on individuals and neighborhood groups to notice, research and communicate issues directly. Elliot said that wall City Council used to be almost full every meeting when Rob Ford was mayor and embroiled in various scandals back in 2013 2014 that's tapered down to a more regular level with the past two mayors, John Tory and Olivia Chow,

**S** Streeter 3 09:49

voting and attending meetings are essentials, but there are many other ways to affect city decisions.

**J** Jaden Whitelaw 09:54

Yeah, for sure, like calling or emailing your councilor. Most councilors make their contact. Information public so you can directly tell them what your concern is.

**S** Streeter 3 10:03

You can also participate in public consultations and surveys. City staff often run consultations on budget priorities, planning changes and service improvements. These create opportunities to shape policy even before it reaches Council.

**J** Jaden Whitelaw 10:17

Just the other day, our producer, Gabriel, saw one of these surveys on social media. The City of Toronto signed a 20 year contract on street furniture like garbage bins and benches that set to expire in 2027 the survey is gathering input on how well or poorly the program has been from bin maintenance to wherever we have enough benches,

**S** Streeter 3 10:38

it will be interesting to see how that shakes out. The survey says responses will inform staff recommendations for future Council decisions on the program.

J Jaden Whitelaw 10:46

Other ways to get involved with politics as an individual are to join or start community groups, local neighborhood associations, advocacy groups or issue coalitions. Amplify individual voices by demonstrating collective support for a change.

S Streeter 3 11:00

My amazing co host Jaden, who talked to Saman Tabasinejad, who is the Executive Director at progress Toronto, a nonprofit advocacy organization founded in 2018 they're focused on building a more democratic, just and progressive city. I would say they focus on city hall, on passing progressive policies and helping elect progressives.

S Saman Tabasinejad 11:21

At City Hall we focus a lot on politics, and we get help people get involved, and we think a lot about power. Who has power, who doesn't? How do we access it? How do we grow it? And a lot of that has to do. I mean, we as individuals, especially, I would say more like people who are less have traditionally left, been left out of power or don't have access to like, traditional modes of power, yeah.

J Jaden Whitelaw 11:47

So basically, what I get in here is that you kind of pull people from the community, and you can put them in power, and you also pull the power of the community and kind of put that in City Hall. Yes, in my conversation with someone, she mentioned how progress, Toronto has a list of volunteers who go through neighborhoods talking to people about what they want to see out of city hall and how they can have a say on what is contested. She also brought another initiative which shows people how to leave their influence on city politics

S Saman Tabasinejad 12:17

We actually run free training series to be able to do that. So we just wrapped up our budget training series. We had a city hall one on one, where we show people how City Hall works. And then we also had a deputation training. Right now we are developing our spring training series, and then we'll have one for the pre election, and then the election. So there'll be a few more coming down the pike. On average, we probably have like three or four training series a year, probably around 20 sessions, 25 sessions, and yeah, so it's a pretty exciting way of getting involved.

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Anish Dhupar 12:53

That is really fascinating. Training sessions to learn about city hall. I definitely think a lot of people would be interested in taking these sessions,

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Jaden Whitelaw 13:01

I think so Anish. But another issue is to spread the word about it, especially to a younger audience. Information about City Hall is there, but has to be in a medium that young people can connect to. Social media, platforms like Instagram and Tiktok

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Streeter 3 13:15

exactly raising awareness online or through local outlets can shift public and political attention, which sometimes forces issues onto City Hall agenda. It could also be used to educate about the entire Democratic process, which goes way beyond voting. As we have covered in length.

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Jaden Whitelaw 13:31

Yes, we have we can honestly talk about this all day, but here's what we can take away, influencing city politics isn't just about running for office. It's about showing up, speaking up and staying informed. In a big city like Toronto, where millions live, but only a fraction vote, residents who engage outside of Election Day have an outsized impact,

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Streeter 3 13:52

from voting to attending meetings, deputations to petitions, your voice matters, and city politics is one of the most direct ways residents can shape the community they live in.

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Jaden Whitelaw 14:02

City Hall remains the most accessible level of government for citizens, and it's in our hands to educate ourselves about what we can do to make an influence. Thanks for tuning in to the on the record podcast this week. We hope this discussion has compelled you to begin leaving your mark on city politics. Special. Thanks to almost barely for our free music letting go, and thanks to our producers, Mia de panfalo and Gabriel Hilty,

**S** Streeter 3 14:27

join us next time for discussion on the city's Net Zero promises.

**J** Jaden Whitelaw 14:30

Yes, is City Hall keeping more promises or breaking more about the environmental footprint of the city?

**A** Anish Dhupar 14:37

until next time, keep checking into our stories on our website, [ontherecordnews.ca](http://ontherecordnews.ca), and look for our news broadcast next week. Bye for now!