

## Handout 2.2: History of Voting Rights in Canada

Below is a summary of important events regarding the history of voting rights in Canada.

### British North America – Only Wealthy Men May Vote (1758-1866)

In the beginning, only wealthy or rich men could vote. To be able to vote you had to own property or other expensive belongings. You could also vote if you paid a certain amount in yearly taxes or rent. Only a small number of people met these requirements. Women and many religious and ethnic groups were not allowed to vote.

### Extending the Right to Vote to Women (1867-1919)

Starting in the 1870s women campaigned with petitions, speeches and public protests for the right to vote. Even though politicians were uncooperative and many people disagreed, these women received the support of powerful organizations and managed to have bills (proposed laws) introduced in the provincial legislatures. When the bills were defeated, they never gave up. Instead they had them reintroduced over and over until they were successful. Manitoba was the first province to extend the vote to women in 1916 and Alberta and other provinces followed shortly afterwards. By 1918, women had gained the same right as men to vote in federal elections.

### Making the Vote Universal (1920-1960)

The right to vote became widespread with the *1920 Dominion Elections Act* but unfairness still existed because of loopholes in election law. Aboriginal people and people of Chinese origin were still unable to vote. Canadian citizens of Japanese origin were at one time denied the right to vote, even if they had served in the Canadian army during the war. Aboriginal people could only vote if they gave up their treaty rights and registered Indian status. Also, various religious groups were treated unfairly. The last restrictions were removed in 1960 after much political debate.

### Accessibility for All (1961-1997)

A variety of steps were taken to make voting easier and more available for all voters, including those with disabilities and those unable to go to their polling station on polling day. Over the years, new methods have been introduced to ensure that all voters have a chance to vote.

- Companies and employers must provide their staff with enough time off during the work day to vote.
- Voting hours were extended so that polling stations opened earlier and closed later.
- Voting on certain days in advance of polling day (advance polls) and voting by special ballot (mail-in ballot) were introduced in some areas, but then expanded more widely.
- Ground-level access for people in wheelchairs was provided at polling stations.
- Mobile polls (movable ballot boxes) began visiting various institutions (e.g., seniors residences, hospitals) to collect the vote.
- Voter information was made available in both official languages and in some Aboriginal languages.

### Charter Challenges (1982 to 2004)

Following the adoption of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, several groups challenged the *Canada Elections Act* to receive the right to vote.

- Federal judges became eligible to cast ballots in federal elections in 1988 after a court determined that the related election law was in conflict with the Charter's guarantee of the right to vote.
- In 1988, the Canadian Disability Rights Council argued in a Charter challenge that election law should not disqualify people who suffer limitations from a mental illness. This disqualification was removed in 1993.
- Since 1982, inmates of several penal institutions have relied on the Charter to establish through the courts that they should be able to vote. In 1993, Parliament removed from the law the disqualification for prisoners serving sentences of less than two years. Although the legislation has not been amended for prisoners serving more than two years, the Supreme Court of Canada in 2002 ruled that prisoners serving terms of more than two years could not be disqualified from voting.

Source: *History of the Vote*