

Handout 2.2: History of Voting Rights in Canada

The following provides some highlights regarding the history of voting rights in Canada.

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

Voting was restricted to wealthy men, as eligibility was based on property ownership — an individual had to own property or other assets of a specified value. Paying a certain amount in annual taxes or rent could also qualify an elector. Only a small part of the population met these requirements. Women and various religious and ethnic groups were not allowed to vote.

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

Beginning in the 1870s, women campaigned with petitions, lectures and public demonstrations for suffrage (the right to vote). These women sought the help of influential organizations and managed to have bills (proposed laws) introduced in provincial legislatures to extend voting rights to women despite hostile public opinion and uncooperative politicians. When the bills were defeated, 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 thereafter. 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 universal with the 1920 *Dominion Elections Act*, but discrimination was still present due to loopholes in the electoral 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. Various religious groups were also affected. The last of these limitations was lifted in 1960 after much political debate.

Accessibility for All (1961-1997)

A variety of steps were taken to make voting even more accessible and convenient for all electors, including those with disabilities and those unable to go to their polling station on election day. Over time, several methods have been introduced to ensure that all voters can exercise their right to vote.

- Employers must provide their staff with sufficient time off during the work day to vote.
- Voting hours were extended.
- Advance polling and voting by mail were introduced, at first on a limited basis but ultimately made available to any voter unable to go to the polling station on election day.
- Level access for people in wheelchairs was provided at polling stations.
- Mobile polls began visiting various institutions to collect the vote.
- Voter information was systematically made available in both official languages and in some Aboriginal and ancestral 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.

- Approximately 500 federally selected 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. In 1993, Parliament removed this disqualification.
- 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 ruled in 2002 that prisoners serving terms of more than two years could not be disqualified from voting and therefore they have been able to cast ballots since 2004.

Source: *History of the Vote*