

GOVERNMENTS IN CANADA



Canada is a **parliamentary democracy**. We elect members to represent us in our federal parliament and our provincial and territorial legislatures.

With the exception of Northwest Territories and Nunavut, most federally and provincially elected representatives are affiliated with a **political party**. A political party is a group of like-minded individuals with a shared vision and political ideology whose intention is to achieve power and create meaningful political change.

If the governing party has more than half of all the seats, they will have a **majority government**. If they have less than half, they will have a **minority government**.

In a parliamentary democracy, the dominant political party or the party with the most members in the parliament or legislature usually determines the leader of the government. Citizens do not vote for the leader directly.

In a parliamentary system, there are three branches or divisions: legislative, executive and judicial.

The **legislative branch** is responsible for debating, amending and passing laws. At the federal level, the legislative branch is made up of an upper and lower

house: the **Senate** includes 105 appointed Senators and the **House of Commons** is made up of elected **Members of Parliament (MPs)**. There are currently 338 MPs and each represents a different geographic area called an **electoral district** or **constituency**.

At the provincial level in British Columbia, the legislative branch is termed the **Legislative Assembly** and the elected representatives are called **Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs)**. There are currently 87 MLAs across the province, each representing an electoral district.

The **executive branch** is responsible for implementing laws and consists of the monarch, the leader of the government and the cabinet. The monarch is represented by the governor general at the federal level and the lieutenant governor at the provincial level. The leader is called the prime minister at the federal level and a premier at the provincial level. The prime minister and the premier both appoint several elected members, usually from their own party, to head the departments or ministries of the executive council (known as the cabinet). Each minister is in charge of one (or more) of the government responsibilities and acts as an advisor to the leader of the government and the legislative body in their area(s) of expertise. The executive branch implements and enforces laws, rules and regulations, with the support of the public service.

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The **judicial branch** is responsible for overseeing and administering the law. Federally, the judicial branch is headed by the Supreme Court and nine appointed judges. At the provincial level, the judicial branch is led by the Chief Justice of British Columbia. The judicial branch interprets the law and punishes those who violate established laws, rules and regulations, and operates independently and separately from the executive and legislative branches of government.

The federal and provincial/territorial governments handle different areas of responsibility. The division of powers is based on the principle of **subsidiarity**, in which the government closest to the issue governs it. The distribution of responsibilities is found in Sections 91–95 of the *Constitution Act*, 1867.

The **federal** government takes responsibility for the whole country and matters of national and international concern, such as the armed forces, relations and trade with other countries, currency, fisheries and oceans, criminal law and public safety.

Provincial and **territorial** governments are responsible for their own province or territory and regional matters including education, healthcare, social welfare and transportation.

There are also policy areas where the federal and provincial governments share jurisdiction, such as the environment, taxation, agriculture and natural resources. This is called **concurrency**.

Other forms of government exist in Canada and they are responsible for more local issues, but they also work collaboratively with the federal, provincial and territorial governments.

Local governments take responsibility for their city or town and community matters such as water and sewage treatment, libraries, roads and bridges and local parks and recreation. The local government system in B.C. includes municipal governments, regional districts and improvement districts, and they acquire their responsibilities from the provincial government. Each municipal government has an elected council made up of local **councillors**. The leader of the council is called a **mayor** and they are elected by the people.

There are also other forms of government in some Indigenous communities or First Nations reserves. **Indigenous governments** often share certain responsibilities with the government of their province/territory and the federal government.

The term **self-government** refers to a First Nation, Métis or Inuit community with control over its own affairs. The level of autonomy varies, but federal and provincial laws still apply and the other levels of government will often work together for the benefit of all community members. Self-governing First Nations have the ability to sign treaties (formal agreements) with the various levels of the Canadian federal government (referred to as Crown). Comprehensive land claims agreements (modern treaties) between Canadian governments and First Nations often result in Indigenous peoples having greater autonomy to choose their own method(s) of representation and decision-making.

BIG IDEA

Canada has several levels of government, each with its own elected representatives and areas of responsibility. Governments make decisions and pass legislation that impact the lives of citizens.

LEARNING INTENTIONS

Upon completion of the lesson, students are expected to know the following:

- The development, structure and functions of political institutions in Canada; and
- The power relationships that exist between citizens, government and other groups.

Students are expected to be able to do the following:

- Assess which level of government in Canada is responsible for different issues; and
- Understand the impact of government on the lives of citizens.

RESOURCES

- Slide Deck 3: Governments in Canada
 - Video: The Levels of Government
 - Video: Parliamentary Democracy in British Columbia
 - Handout 3.1: Government Responsibilities
 - Activity Sheet 3.2: Investigating Government
 - Handout 3.3: History of Indigenous Self-Government
 - Activity Sheet 3.4: First Nation Profile
 - Provincial Ministry Descriptions (available online)
 - Political Trivia *Jeopardy!* (available online)
- (Videos, slide decks and digital versions of the activity sheets can be found at www.studentvote.ca/bc)

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ACTIVITIES

Hook: 10-15 min

1. Test your students' current knowledge of governments in Canada. What are the different levels of government in Canada? What is the title given to the leader at each level? Which individuals are in these positions today?
2. Write down the levels of government on the board. Ask students to consider the elected representative(s) from which level of government they would contact in the following scenarios:
 - a) You and your friends would like a skate ramp added to the local park.
 - b) You think there should be more financial aid available to help youth pursue post-secondary education or skills and training programs.
 - c) The streetlight near your home is broken and needs to be replaced.
 - d) You are traveling to a foreign country and need to find out if there are any travel advisories.
 - e) The hospital in your town is in need of a new X-ray machine.
3. Reflect and debrief – How much do you know about government? Why is it important to understand government and politics? What do you want to learn about government in Canada? Ask students to respond to one or more of these questions in a short written reflection.

Discussion: 5-10 min

Why is it important to know the roles and responsibilities associated with each level of government? Why is it important to know who your elected representatives are?

Essential Concepts: 20 min

Use Slide Deck 3, the 'Levels of Government' video and the 'Parliamentary Democracy in British Columbia' video, review the key terms and concepts regarding the levels of government in Canada: federal, provincial/territorial, local, Member of Parliament, Member of the Legislative Assembly, councillor, parliament, prime minister, premier, mayor, subsidiarity, concurrency, self-government.

★ Action: 20-25 min

1. Review the list of responsibilities for each level of government (Handout 3.1).
2. Divide students into small groups and assign each a different provincial government ministry. Give each group the task of researching their assigned ministry. This activity can be completed using online resources and government websites, or information from the list of *Provincial Ministry Descriptions* (available online) can be distributed.
3. Each group will create a short presentation or skit on the role and responsibilities of their ministry (e.g., What type of programs or services do they offer? How do they aim to help people? What are some recent announcements or legislation? Are responsibilities of this ministry shared with other forms of government in the region?).

✚ Extensions:

A. Using online resources, ask students to fill out Activity Sheet 3.2. This could be completed in a computer lab or assigned for homework. Use the following links as a starting point:

- Governor General of Canada — www.gg.ca
- Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia — www.ltgov.bc.ca
- Parliament of Canada — www.parl.gc.ca
- Elections Canada — www.elections.ca
- Elections BC — www.elections.bc.ca
- Legislative Assembly of British Columbia — www.leg.bc.ca

Teacher Note: As an alternative to Activity Sheet 3.2, students could work together to co-create a quiz for other students based on what they determine to be the critical information from the above links. Once completed, students could swap what they have created.

B. Learn more about Indigenous self-government in Canada by reviewing Handout 3.3 with your class. Use the First Nations Map and other resources on the Government of Canada website (<https://geo.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/cippn-fnpim/index-eng.html>) and other resources to locate the First Nations or Métis communities or reserves closest to your school. As a class or in small groups, have students select a First Nation and complete Activity Sheet 3.4.

C. Play a game of political trivia (e.g., What is the title given to the leader of our country? Who holds this position? Which party do they represent?). You can use or modify the Political Trivia *Jeopardy!* game available online or create your own list of questions and answers. Activity Sheet 3.2 could also be used for reference.

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Teacher Note: Kahoot (or another survey tool) can also be used to create a game of political trivia.

D. Invite a person from a local or nearby First Nation or Indigenous community who is knowledgeable about self-government issues to speak to the class. A First Nations Elder, an Indigenous politician or a member of a band council could be invited. If your school has an Aboriginal Advocate or liaison, connect with them to see if they have information about the local Indigenous community and its government to share, or you can contact a Friendship Centre or a First Nation organization for suggestions (e.g., Assembly of First Nations, Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres).

E. The British Columbia provincial government presents an annual budget every February. The budget is an estimate of expected provincial government revenues and expenses for the next fiscal year, and often sets the annual economic agenda for the government. In the lead-up to an election, the governing party will sometimes use the budget to introduce policies in an attempt to attract voters. Review the most recent budget documents online (www.bcbudget.gov.bc.ca), or a summary of the highlights, for a breakdown of where the province gets its money and where it plans to spend it. Discussion questions: Are you surprised by the breakdown of the government's revenues and/or expenditures? Where do you think the provincial government should spend more or less? Should the government increase or decrease any of its revenue sources?

F. Compare the parliamentary system of government in Canada to the presidential system of government in the United States. What are the similarities and differences? What are the strengths and limitations of each system? Which system do you prefer and why?



Reflection: 5-10 min

Have a closing discussion about governments in Canada. Alternatively, ask students to write a reflection for their election scrapbook (see *Assessment Opportunities*).

- What have you learned about governments in Canada?
- How involved should governments be in the lives of their citizens?
- Why might Indigenous peoples prefer their own system of self-government?

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "How Canadians Govern Themselves," *Parliament of Canada* — lop.parl.ca/about/parliament/senatoreugeneforse/home/index-e.html
- "Discover Canada," *Citizenship and Immigration Canada* — www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/discover-canada.html
- Elections BC — www.elections.bc.ca
- Legislative Assembly of British Columbia — www.leg.bc.ca
- Parliament of Canada — www.parl.gc.ca
- Government of Canada — www.gc.ca
- Indigenous Services Canada and Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada — www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca
- First Nation Profiles Interactive Map — geo.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/cippn-fnpim/index-eng.html
- First Nations in B.C. Knowledge Network — www.fnbc.info
- "Guide to Indigenous Organizations & Services," *Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation* — www.gov.bc.ca/arr/services/guide.html