

History of Voting Rights in Canada

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

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

In the beginning, only wealthy 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.



Nellie McClung, activist for women's suffrage and one of Canada's first female elected politicians.

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 introduced in provincial legislatures. When the bills were defeated, they persisted and had them reintroduced over and over until they were successful. Manitoba was the first province to extend the vote to women in 1916 and other provinces followed in the coming years. By 1918, women had 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 remained. 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 military during the war. Aboriginal People could only vote if they gave up their treaty rights and registered Indian status. Various religious groups were also 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 even more available and easy for all voters, including people with disabilities and those unable to go to their polling place on voting day.

- Employers were required to provide their staff with enough time off during the work day to vote.
- Voting hours were extended.
- Advance voting and voting by mail were introduced, at first on a limited basis but ultimately made available to any voter. Voting by mail is used by students living away from home, travelling vacationers, business people, incarcerated electors, and those temporarily living outside the country including members of the Canadian Forces and public servants.
- Level access for people in wheelchairs was provided at polling places, and accessibility criteria were developed to help choose polling places.
- Mobile polls were introduced to visit various institutions to collect the vote.
- Voter information was made available in both official languages and in some Aboriginal and other ethnocultural languages. Additionally, information programs were put in place to make the referendum and election process better known to citizens, particularly those persons and groups most likely to experience difficulty in exercising their democratic rights.
- New voting tools and services were offered to meet the diverse needs of Canadians, including magnifiers to help read ballots, tactile and braille voting templates, large-print lists of candidates, braille lists of candidates, and sign-language interpretation.



Prime Minister John Diefenbaker oversaw the extension of the right to vote to Aboriginal People in 1960.

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.

- About 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 laws should not disqualify people who have 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 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. Therefore they have been able to cast ballots since 2004.

Source: *History of the Vote*