

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.



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)

Beginning in the 1870s, women campaigned with petitions, lectures and public demonstrations for suffrage (the right to vote). Despite hostile public opinion and uncooperative politicians, 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. 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 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 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 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 place on election day. Over time, several methods have been introduced to ensure that all voters can exercise their right to vote.

- 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.

- 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 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 ruled in 2002 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.