

Lesson 2

The Right to Vote



GUIDING QUESTIONS

❶ How have voting rights evolved in Canada?

❷ Is it important to vote?

SUMMARY

Universal suffrage is the right of all citizens to vote in elections and it took decades of people and groups campaigning for equality for this to be achieved.

In this lesson, students learn about the struggles some groups experienced in gaining the right to vote in Canada. After summarizing key milestones, students create a visual timeline of events in history that shaped our voting rights today. In an alternative activity, students form groups to investigate and analyze the actions of individuals and groups that contributed to universal suffrage and improved accessibility of the electoral process in Canada. In the *Consolidation* activity, students discuss the importance

of participating in the local government elections and create a digital product of their choice to encourage people to vote.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the lesson, students can:

- describe key milestones in the history of voting rights in Canada;
- analyze the actions of individuals and groups that contributed to universal suffrage;
- assess the importance of voting in elections;
- demonstrate effective communication skills using words and graphics.

Starter

1. Inform your students about the upcoming local government elections and the Student Vote program.
 - In Canada, we have different levels of government: federal (responsible for the country), provincial or territorial (responsible for each province or territory) and municipal or local (responsible for towns and cities). There are also Indigenous governments responsible for managing their own communities.
 - Every four years, voters across New Brunswick elect politicians to sit on their local government councils and make decisions for their communities. The upcoming local government elections will take place on May 10, 2021.
 - Elementary and high school students will also have an opportunity to take part in the elections through a program called **Student Vote**.
 - After learning about local government and researching the candidates, students will vote in a parallel election.
 - Although the votes will not count in the official tallies, the Student Vote results are released publicly and through the news media. This allows young people to have a voice in the election and have their opinions shared.
2. Watch the “Student Vote Vancouver 2018” video to hear students and teachers speak about their experience with the program during the 2018 Vancouver municipal elections and why they believe voting is important.
3. Afterwards, ask students to share their own thoughts about voting and/or participating in Student Vote. Discussion questions: Is voting important? Should students learn about voting before they are eligible to vote?

Activities

1. Briefly review the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and the idea that our rights have evolved over time. See Slide Deck 2.
 - The Charter has seven distinct categories: Fundamental freedoms, Democratic rights, Mobility rights, Legal rights, Equality rights, Official language rights, and Minority language education rights.
 - Democratic rights include the right of every Canadian, 18 years of age or older, to vote in an election, and the right to be a candidate in an election.
 - Rights are often fought for and claimed (in courts or through protests), and less often simply granted.

2. Watch the "Right to Vote" video as a class. This video reviews the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and summarizes the history of voting rights in Canada.

Video clarifications:

- Although women in Canada gained the right to vote by 1918, there were still many exclusions due to race, ethnic origin and religion. Universal suffrage for all women was not achieved until the 1960s.
 - Voter turnout has been slightly higher in the last two federal elections (66% and 67%, respectively).
 - Electoral participation has increased among youth in recent years but it is still lower than rest of the population. Only 54% of youth, aged 18-24, cast ballots in the 2019 federal election.
3. Distribute copies of Handout 2.1 and Activity 2.2. In pairs or individually, ask students to review the handout and record the date when voting rights for a particular group were changed or access was improved, and summarize the details and actions leading up to it.
 4. Afterwards, have students create a visual timeline, in print or digital format, showing the most significant milestones or the years when various groups received the right to vote or when access was improved. Encourage students to use any design and format they like and find ways to emphasize the most pivotal aspects.

Alternative Activity

1. Divide the class into groups to research the major developments in the history of voting rights in Canada. Groups could focus on one particular time period or be assigned a specific group (e.g., women, Indigenous Peoples, Canadians in prison).
2. Using Handout 2.1 as a starting point, have each group conduct research into which historical action or condition was most responsible for their designated group achieving the right to vote and create a visual presentation to share with the rest of the class.

Guiding questions:

- How notable was the event at the time? What was the impact on the period?
- How widespread and lasting were the consequences? Is it still significant today?
- How symbolic or representative of historical issues or trends were the consequences?
- How does it help us understand why voting rights evolved in Canada?

3. Have groups share their presentation through Google Classroom, or re-assign students to different groups for a sharing session.
4. As a class, have a closing discussion about the pathway to universal suffrage.
 - How does each group's pathway to suffrage compare or differ?
 - Were suffrage movements linked to one another? If so, how?
 - What do you think was the most important turning point for universal suffrage in Canada, and why?

Discussion questions:

- Are you surprised by the level of voter turnout?
 - What are the consequences of some people not voting in government elections?
 - Why is it important that our voting process be fair, accessible and as democratic as possible?
2. Ask students to create a digital communications product to encourage an adult they know to vote in the May local government elections. It could be a video, slide deck, digital poster or social media graphic.

Consolidation

1. Share voter turnout statistics from the last local government election and discuss the consequences of low levels of participation, particularly among different groups. Check with your own municipality or local government for voter turnout statistics.
 - The average participation rate for local government elections was 45.4% in 2016.
 - Voter turnout rates differed across the province – from 80.7% in Saint-Léolin to 20.1% in Oromocto.

Suggested Assessment

Ask students to answer the following question (either formative or summative assessment).

Question: What is the most significant historical event that contributed to universal suffrage in Canada?

SUPPORTS AND ADAPTATIONS

Language Learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide students with terms and definitions in advance. • Ensure subtitles are on during videos. • Share the lesson videos before class discussions and activities.
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remind students that new immigrants, adults who have difficulty reading, Language Learners, persons who are homeless, newly arrived refugees, and other specific groups may face challenges understanding or accessing the election system. Keep the focus on ideas to increase access and the benefits our society gets from hearing different voices, not only on the disadvantages these groups face. • When researching the history of voting rights, select groups relevant to your students and/or community (e.g., Black New Brunswickers, Mi'kmaq). • Provide research findings into why young people tend to vote less.
Accommodations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If working in pairs or small groups in the classroom is not possible, consider using Google Docs for collaborative discussion/brainstorming.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

A **right** is a legal entitlement or something that we are morally or legally allowed to do or have. Rights are often fought for and claimed (in courts or through protests) and less often simply granted. With all rights come responsibilities.

A **responsibility** is a duty or obligation. It is something you should do in order to respect and maintain certain rights.

All citizens living in a democracy have civil and political rights, which are usually articulated in a legal document as part of a constitution, such as a **bill of rights**. This document limits the powers of government, explains the freedoms that are guaranteed to all people and protects people from a government that might abuse its powers.

In Canada, our rights are protected by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Canada's Charter is widely admired around the world and is the constitutional document most emulated by other nations.

The Charter has seven distinct categories:

- **Fundamental freedoms** include the freedom of conscience and religion; freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression including freedom of the press and other media; freedom of peaceful assembly; and freedom of association.
- **Democratic rights** include the right of every Canadian, 18 years of age or older, to vote in an election, to be a candidate in an election, the requirement that governments hold elections at least every five years, and the requirement that elected representatives meet at least once per year.
- **Mobility rights** include the right of every Canadian to choose to live and work in any province or territory in Canada. Canadians also have the right to live in, leave or re-enter Canada whenever they choose.
- **Legal rights** include the guarantee that Canadians, when arrested, must be told of their right to see a lawyer and must be tried within a reasonable amount of time. Canadians are also guaranteed the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty.
- **Equality rights** include the right of any Canadian not to be discriminated against on the basis of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age, or mental or physical ability.
- **Official language rights** include the right of all Canadians to use either English or French in communications with Canada's federal government.
- **Minority language education rights** include the rights for French or English minorities in every province and territory to be educated in their own language under certain conditions.

