

HANDOUT 8.1: History of Voting Rights in Ontario

The following outlines important events in the history of voting rights in Ontario.



ELECTIONS AS A BRITISH COLONY (1792-1866)

Before Ontario became a province within Canada, voting rights were very restricted. Only land-owning British citizens over the age of 21 who had not committed a serious crime could vote. Few women qualified because married women could not own property.

The first recorded instance of women voting took place in 1844. At least seven women voted in the election. In response to this, parliament moved to ban all women from voting.



EXTENDING THE RIGHT TO VOTE TO WOMEN (1867- 1919)

In Ontario's first election as a province following Confederation, only land-owning men over the age of 21 were able to vote. Voting was done through a show of hands.

Starting in the 1870s, women campaigned for the right to vote. Even though many disagreed, these women managed to have bills introduced in the provincial legislature. When the bills were defeated, they did not give up and had them reintroduced. In 1917, women in Ontario won the right to vote. However, the right to vote did not include all women. Many women were still excluded because of their race, ethnic origin and religion.



MAKING THE VOTE UNIVERSAL (1920-1960)

Although women had gained the right to vote and run for office in Ontario, inequality remained. Indigenous peoples and Canadian citizens of Chinese and Japanese origin were not allowed to vote. Religious groups were also treated unfairly. Indigenous peoples could only vote if they gave up other rights. After much debate, the last restrictions for these groups were removed by 1960.



ACCESSIBILITY FOR ALL (1961-TODAY)

A variety of steps were taken to make voting easier and more accessible to all voters:

- Voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 years of age.
- People without permanent housing were allowed to vote.
- Employers were required to give their staff time to vote during the workday.
- Voting hours were extended, advance voting, voting by mail, traveling voting stations were introduced.
- Voting was made more accessible for voters with disabilities.
- Voter information was made available in multiple languages.
- The Ontario Register of Future Voters was introduced to make it easier for young people to vote.



CHARTER CHALLENGES (1982 TO 2004)

The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* guarantees the right to vote for Canadian citizens. Since it became law in 1982, several groups have challenged election laws to receive the right to vote. This has meant that more diverse Ontarians (such as people with mental illness and inmates at correctional facilities) are able to cast a ballot.