The right to vote in Canada has not always been universal. It has been withheld from many groups throughout history based on gender, race, background, religion and even occupation. It took decades for individuals and groups campaigning for fairness before equality was achieved.

Early in Canada’s history, individuals had to own property or pay a certain amount in yearly taxes or rent to be able to vote. Only a small number of people qualified, mostly wealthy Protestant men.

Starting in the 1870s, women campaigned with petitions, speeches and public protests for the right to vote. It took nearly 50 years for change to happen. Manitoba was the first province to pass suffrage legislation to include women in January 1916. Most women in Prince Edward Island received the right to vote in 1918. Also in 1918, women in Canada could vote federally and gained the right to run for federal office in 1919.

Even though Canadian women achieved suffrage, it was not applicable to all. Women and men of several ethnic and racial minorities, such as Canadians of Chinese and Japanese origin and Indigenous Peoples, were still disenfranchised for several decades.

First Nations men could only vote if they gave up their treaty rights and registered Indian status. First Nations people were not given the right to vote in Prince Edward Island provincial elections until 1960.

Universal suffrage is the extension of the right to vote to all adult citizens, including the removal of property ownership requirements and restrictions against women, First Nations and Inuit peoples, and ethnic and religious minorities.

In addition to universal suffrage, more steps have been taken to reduce barriers and make voting more accessible. Some of these changes including longer voting hours on polling day, advance voting, voting by mail, mobile polling stations, ensuring voting places are accessible for mobility devices and voting supports such Braille and large-print ballots.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms has also helped several groups force changes to election laws. Federal judges, people with mental illness and prisoners have more recently received the right to vote.

Ensuring all citizens have the right to vote and the right to run for office is essential in a democratic society. These rights underpin many democratic principles, such as political tolerance, equality rights, free and fair elections, and citizen participation.
LESSON 6: UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE

GUIDING QUESTION
How have voting rights evolved in Canada?

PURPOSE
The right to vote has been withheld from many groups throughout history based on gender, race, background and religion. Universal suffrage is the right of all citizens to vote in elections. It took decades of people and groups campaigning for equality for this to be achieved.

In this lesson, students reflect on democratic rights in Canada, as well as the importance of equality, political tolerance and citizen participation in a democracy. After reviewing an overview of the history of voting rights in Canada, students form groups to investigate the actions of individuals and groups that contributed to universal suffrage and improved accessibility to voting. In the culminating discussion, students reflect on the importance of exercising their right to vote and protecting minority rights.

LEARNING OUTCOMES
By the end of the lesson, I can...

• describe personal and societal rights and responsibilities;
• analyze the actions of individuals and groups which led to universal suffrage in Canada;
• collaborate with my peers to gather, analyze and communicate research;
• assess the historical significance of the pathway to universal suffrage in Canada and democracy today;
• explain why electoral participation and civic engagement is important.

INTRODUCTION
1. Ask students if they know what democratic rights we have in Canada. In summary, our democratic rights include our ability to participate in political activities and to have a democratic form of government.

There are three related sections in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms:
• SECTION 3: Every Canadian citizen, 18 years of age or older, has the right to vote in a government election, and to become a candidate and serve as an elected representative.
• SECTION 4: Governments must hold elections at least every five years.
• SECTION 5: An annual sitting of legislatures is required as a minimum (elected representatives must meet at least once per year).

2. In addition to democratic rights, other aspects contribute to Canada's democracy. Review the principles of democracy (Handout 2.3) and connect our democratic rights to specific principles of democracy (equality rights, bill of rights, free and fair elections, citizen participation, political tolerance). Even in a democratic county such as Canada, there have been times when one or more of these principles have not been upheld or they have been limited to specific individual or groups. It is important for students to understand that democratic rights are limited when principles of democracy are not upheld or equally applied.

3. Facilitate a discussion about voting rights and democratic principles.
• Why is equality important in a democracy?
• Why is political tolerance vital for democracy?
• Why is citizen participation essential in a democracy?

Divide students into groups and give them time to discuss the questions. Conclude by having a class discussion on the three questions.

Teacher Note: Be sensitive to issues at home that may challenge perspectives around democratic participation, such as religious reasons or traditions followed by certain groups.

ACTIVITIES
1. Explain to students that the right to vote in Canada has not always been universal. Many groups have been excluded throughout history based on gender, race, background and religion. Watch the ‘Right to Vote’ video and review Handout 6.1.

Video Clarification: Although Canadian women gained the right to vote by 1918, there were still many exclusions due to race, ethnic origin and religion. Universal suffrage for all Canadian women was not achieved until the 1960’s.

2. 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, within or across time periods.

For example:
• Women’s suffrage movement (1916-1918)
• 1920 Dominion Elections Act (1920)
• First Nations suffrage movement (1960)
• Universal suffrage
• Persons with disabilities
• Inmates and prisoners
LESSON 6: UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE

Using Handout 6.1 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.

- How notable was the event at the time? What was the impact on the time 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 research through a classroom presentation or through a jigsaw method where findings are shared within groups. Depending on the method used, the presentation could incorporate different multi-media formats or be shared through a skit.

4. Through a closing discussion, have students rank the significance of the historical actions or events in the evolution of voting rights in Canada. Ask students to consider the following questions to help justify their rankings:

- How does each group’s pathway to suffrage compare or differ?
- Were suffrage movements linked to one another? If so, how?

CONCLUSION

Read the parliamentary debates from the women’s suffrage era and the arguments made by Members of Parliament against granting women the right to vote. Ask students to write a rebuttal to one or more of the members outlining two or more reasons why women should have the same voting rights as men.

Selected quotes:

“Far from being a step forward for women, this so-called emancipation will mean disaster to those on whose behalf it is granted, as well as to the nation at large. Let us consider the social position of women in the state. Everywhere they are tendered respect, admiration, attention; in a word, they are idealized. This admiration is extended to them because we all recognize their sublime mission; that is to say, the moral and intellectual development of our children. I believe that it is a dangerous experiment to take them away from our homes.” (Marie-Joseph Demers, Liberal MP, St. John’s-Iberville, Newfoundland)

“What’s place is not at political rallies, on election committees or in the polling booth. The ideal spot for woman is the family fireside. Isn’t she, in all truth, the angel of the hearth?” (Joseph-Emile D’Anjou, Liberal MP, Rimouski, Quebec)

“The reward offered the women of Canada by the Prime Minister will become the instrument of their torture and the cause of their downfall. It will injure women physically. Who shall say that at all times they will be equal to the excitements of caucus rows, campaign slanders, briberies, inflammable speeches, torch parades and balloting on stormy days?” (Charles Fournier, Liberal MP, Bellechasse, Quebec)

“The physiology of woman, the anatomy of woman, reveals that she is in this world for the purpose of love and motherhood and not for the purpose of political strife.” (Jean-Joseph Denis, Liberal MP, Joliette, Quebec)

ASSESSMENT FOR STUDENT LEARNING

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

Question: What has been the most historically significant event contributing to universal suffrage in Canada?

Ask students to make two arguments to support their choice.