

History of Voting Rights in Canada

The following outlines some highlights 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 pay a certain amount in yearly taxes or rent. Only a small number of people met these requirements. Women and most religious and ethnic minority 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 closely followed by Saskatchewan and most of the other provinces. 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 widespread with the 1920 *Dominion Elections Act*, but unfairness remained. Aboriginal peoples and Canadians 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 peoples could only vote if they gave up their treaty rights and registered Indian status. Various religious groups were also treated unfairly. The last restrictions for these groups were removed in 1960 after much political debate.

Accessibility for All (1961-1997)

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

- 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).
- Access for people in wheelchairs was provided at voting places and accessibility criteria were developed for the selection of voting places.
- 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.
- Mobile polls were introduced to visit various institutions (including colleges and universities) to collect votes.
- Voter information was made available in both official languages and in some Indigenous 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.



Prime Minister John Diefenbaker oversaw the extension of the right to vote to Aboriginal peoples 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 appointed judges became eligible to cast ballots in federal elections in 1988, after a court determined that their exclusion 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. It was not until 1993 that Parliament removed this disqualification.
- Since 1982, inmates of several penal institutions have relied on the Charter to argue 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 longer sentences, 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.