

LESSON 9

VOTING RIGHTS

The right to vote in Canada has not always been universal. It has been withheld from many groups throughout history based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion and even occupation. It took decades of people and groups campaigning for equality to be 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. Women in Ontario received the right to vote and run for office provincially on April 12, 1917. By 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. 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 Ontario provincial elections until 1954.

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, and ethnic and religious minorities. Universal suffrage was not achieved in Canada until 1960.

In addition to universal suffrage, more steps have been taken to reduce barriers and make voting more accessible. Some of these changes include longer voting hours on election day, advance voting, vote 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.