

LESSON 7

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN A DEMOCRACY

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.

A **right** is a legal entitlement or protected freedom. Rights are often fought for a 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.

In Canada, our rights are protected by the **Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms**. The Charter falls into seven distinct categories: fundamental freedoms, democratic rights, mobility rights, legal rights, equality rights, official languages rights and minority language education rights. Canada's Charter is widely admired around the world and is the constitutional document most emulated by other nations.

Our **democratic rights** include the right for every Canadian citizen, aged 18 and older, to vote in government elections. However, the right to vote in Canada has not always been universal. It has been withheld from many groups throughout history.

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, Inuit and Métis Peoples, as well as ethnic and religious minorities. The pathway to a lengthy and required years of persistent protest by disenfranchised groups. Different groups received the right to vote at different times. Universal suffrage was

Despite moving beyond these injustices, electoral participation has been on the decline in Canada over the past several decades. In particular, low voter turnout is disproportionately concentrated among young Canadians.

The 2011 National Youth Survey Report, commissioned by Elections Canada, identified several reasons why youth do not vote. These barriers include a lack of political interest and knowledge, not knowing where or how to vote and a lower sense that voting was a civic duty.