

HANDOUT 2.1: HISTORY OF VOTING RIGHTS IN CANADA (VERSION 1)

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

British North America – Only Wealthy Men May Vote (1758-1866)

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. Women and most religious and ethnic minority groups did not have democratic rights.

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 and many others disagreed, these women received the support of powerful organizations. They managed to have bills introduced in provincial legislatures. When the bills were defeated, they continued their efforts and had them reintroduced until they were successful. Manitoba was the first province to extend the vote to women in 1916. Other provinces followed shortly thereafter, including Ontario in 1917. In 1918, women gained the right to vote in federal elections. It is important to note, that although women achieved suffrage based on gender, there were still many exclusions due to race, ethnic origin and religion.



Nellie McClung, activist for women's suffrage and one of Canada's first female elected politicians.

Making the Vote Universal (1920-1960)

The right to vote became more accessible with the 1920 *Dominion Elections Act*, yet inequality remained. Indigenous peoples and Canadian citizens of Chinese origin and Japanese origin were also denied the right to vote, even if they had served in the Canadian military. Indigenous peoples could only vote if they gave up their treaty rights and registered Indian status. Religious groups were also treated unfairly. The last restrictions for these groups were removed in 1960, after much political debate.



Prime Minister John Diefenbaker oversaw the extension of the right to vote to Indigenous peoples in 1960.

Accessibility for All (1961-1997)

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

- Employers were required to provide their staff with enough time off during the workday to vote.
- Voting hours were extended.
- Advance voting and voting by mail were introduced. Initially, offered on a limited basis, but then 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 needs of Canadians. This includes magnifiers to help read ballots, tactile and Braille voting templates, large-print lists of candidates, Braille lists of candidates and sign language interpretation.
- Travelling voting stations were introduced to visit various institutions (including colleges and universities) to collect votes.
- Voter information was made available in English and French, and in some Indigenous and ethno-cultural languages.
- Information programs were also introduced which made election processes better known to citizens. These resources and programs have targeted groups most likely to experience difficulty in exercising their democratic rights.

Charter Challenges (1982 to 2004)

Following the arrival 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. A court had 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 those with mental illness should not be disqualified. It was not until 1993 that Parliament removed this disqualification.
- Since 1982, inmates of several correctional 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. In 2002, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that prisoners serving terms of more than two years could not be disqualified from voting. Although the legislation has not changed, these inmates have been able to cast ballots since 2004.