

# HANDOUT 9.1: HISTORY OF VOTING RIGHTS IN CANADA

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

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

During this period, very few people were allowed to vote. The law was that you had to own land or pay a certain amount in yearly taxes or rent. Most voters were white wealthy men. Women and many religious and ethnic groups were not allowed to vote.

## Extending the Right to Vote to Women (1867-1919)

Starting in the 1870s, women started to campaign for the right to vote. They used petitions, speeches and marches to spread their message. Gaining support was not easy.

Women received help from powerful groups and tried to have the laws changed. However, politicians did not approve the bills. It was disappointing but women did not give up.

After many years, women started to make change. Manitoba was the first province to let women vote in 1916. Other provinces followed after. In 1917, women could vote in Ontario provincial elections. By 1918, women could vote in federal elections. But the changes did not apply to all women. Women from many ethnic and religious groups were left out.



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

## Extending the Right to Vote to All Groups (1920-1960)

A new law was approved in 1920 that allowed more people to vote. It was called the *Dominion Elections Act*. Yet the system was still unfair. Indigenous peoples, Chinese and Japanese Canadians could not vote. It did not even matter if they had been in the Canadian army. Indigenous peoples could only vote if



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

they gave up their treaty rights. Many religious groups were also treated unfairly for years.

It took many years of protest and debate to achieve equality. All groups were finally given the right to vote in 1960.

## Making Voting Easy (1961-1997)

During this time, more steps were taken to remove barriers and make voting easier.

- Employers had to give their staff enough time off during the day to vote.
- Voting hours were made longer.
- People could vote in advance on certain days.
- People could vote by mail. This is used by students living away from home, people who are travelling or living outside the country.
- Voting places are now selected based on access for wheelchairs.
- New voting tools and extra help were offered to voters. Such as magnifiers to help read ballots, Braille ballots and large-print ballots. Sign language was also provided.
- Voting places were set up at certain locations to make it easier to vote (e.g., colleges, universities, hospitals).
- Information for voters was made available in more languages.
- Learning programs were created to help people become more aware about how to vote.

## Charter Challenges (1982 to 2004)

The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* was created to protect our rights and freedoms. It has helped several groups force changes to election laws.

- Federal judges could not vote in federal elections until 1988. It was a court decision that changed this law.
- In 1993, election laws were changed to allow people who have a mental illness to vote.
- Prisoners were able to vote starting in 1993. However, this did not include all prisoners. Their sentence had to be less than two years.
- In 2002, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that individuals in prison for more than two years could not be left out. They have been able to cast ballots since 2004.