Japanese Canadians have lived in Canada since the 1870s, mostly in British Columbia. In this province, they worked as fishers, farmers and business owners. Due to racism, the British Columbia government banned Japanese Canadians who lived there from voting in provincial elections. This ban also affected their right to vote in federal elections.

Canada fought with Japan in the Second World War (1939–1945). During this time, Japanese Canadians lost even more democratic rights. The government thought that Japanese Canadians threatened Canada’s security and forced them to move away from the Pacific Coast. They could not vote in federal elections, no matter which province they lived in. Japanese Canadians were finally allowed to vote in all federal and provincial elections in 1948.

In the years that followed, Japanese Canadians asked for an apology. They finally got one in 1988, when the federal government formally apologized for past wrongs.

Britain Columbia joins Confederation – it becomes part of Canada. Canada now includes a small population of Japanese Canadians. They have the right to vote in provincial and federal elections if they:

- are male,
- are age 21 or older, and
- own property.

The British Columbia government passes a law that bans Japanese Canadians from voting in provincial elections. Why? Because racist beliefs were common in the province at that time.
1900

Tomekichi Homma wants the right to vote in the British Columbia elections. He takes his legal fight all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada. The Supreme Court rules in his favour, saying he should have the right to vote. This decision is later overruled in England. So, he is not successful.

Source: Yoshimaru Abe Collection, Nikkei National Museum, 2013.54.4

1917

During the First World War, Japanese Canadians join the military to fight for Canada. These soldiers and all Canadian military are given the right to vote in the 1917 election.

Source: Masumi Mitsui Collection, Nikkei National Museum, 2014.10.1.10

1920

Prime Minister Robert Borden’s government passes a new federal election law: if a province does not allow people to vote because of their race, those people can’t vote in federal elections, either. This law means that Japanese Canadians in British Columbia lose their right to vote in federal elections.

Source: William James Topley, Library and Archives Canada, PA-028129

1936

The Japanese Canadian Citizens League sends a delegation to the House of Commons to ask for the right to vote. Prime Minister Mackenzie King says he did not know they wanted to vote.

The League speaks before a special committee, but doesn’t get the federal vote for Japanese Canadians.

Source: Isami (Sam) Okamoto Collection, Nikkei National Museum, 2000.14.1.1.1
After Japan attacks Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Canada declares war against Japan. Many Canadians see Japanese Canadians as a security threat. Racism against Japanese Canadians gets worse.

Twelve weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Government of Canada orders all Japanese Canadians to be moved from the British Columbia coast. They are forced to live under guard in camps away from everyone else.

After the Second World War ends, Parliament gives Japanese Canadians the right to vote in federal elections again.

The Canadian government officially apologizes to Japanese Canadians for denying them their civil and democratic rights. Here Prime Minister Brian Mulroney signs the apology while Art Miki of the National Association of Japanese Canadians looks on.