



Women's Right to Vote

Case Study

✘ Background information

When Canada was formed in 1867, only men could cast a ballot in Canadian elections. Each province had slightly different rules, but essentially women were excluded from the vote everywhere in the country. Change happened slowly and incrementally for Canadian women. Women (and men) actively mobilized in a multitude of ways, and often faced opposition from men and women alike. Women's suffrage organizations were first established in the 1870s in Toronto under the leadership of pioneer activists such as Dr. Emily Stowe. Other groups formed soon after and created alliances with international organizations, such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union.

In the early 20th century, long-held ideas about the suitability of women for public life began to shift. The greatest momentum for women's equality came from the Prairie region of Western Canada. Manitoba women were especially active, presenting numerous petitions to the legislature, lobbying politicians, partnering with organizations, lecturing on equality and building public support. Their efforts bore results, with Manitoba being the first province to grant some women the vote in 1916, followed a few months later by Saskatchewan and Alberta.

While things were changing in the provinces, the federal vote remained closed to women. However, there was a limited advance in 1917 during the First World War, when women serving in the military or who had a relative serving in the armed forces became the first women in Canada to have the opportunity to vote in a federal election. The momentum continued: a year later, in 1918, Parliament passed a law that removed the gender barrier to voting and gave many Canadian women the right to vote. This did not mean that all women had the right to vote. Exclusions remained—not on the basis of gender, but for other reasons, such as race.

The struggle for women's equality did not end in 1918, as many women continued to be denied the right to vote. Women in Quebec obtained the provincial vote only in 1940, and First Nations women were excluded from the federal vote until 1960. Today, women are prominent in the political life of Canada, yet they still face obstacles to full participation in the democratic process.

Why was there so much resistance to women getting the vote?

- **Assumed male superiority**
Many religious and cultural beliefs held that women were subordinate to men.
- **Public versus private domains**
There was a long-standing belief that men were better suited to public life (politics and business) and women were more suited to private (domestic) life.
- **Role in society**
Many thought that women occupied a special role, inconsistent with politics, that included household duties, child rearing, and being caregivers and supporters to men.
- **Implied weakness**
There was a common notion that women would not contribute to political life, as they were considered not strong enough, too easily led, not logical in their thinking and overly emotional.
- **Knowledge**
Women were thought to lack the knowledge essential to casting an informed vote.
- **Family vote**
It was assumed wives and daughters would vote the same way as their husbands and fathers, and so provide an unfair advantage.

What changed?

- **Political gain**
Women made up approximately 50 percent of the population and represented untapped votes for political parties.
- **Agency**
Women wanted change and so they organized, mobilized, coordinated their efforts and made their voices heard.
- **Effects of the First World War**
Women's role in the First World War, taking on a number of jobs previously reserved to men, proved that their abilities had been underestimated. After the war, both the United Kingdom and the United States also enfranchised women.
- **Equality**
Ideas about gender equality, fairness and the positive contribution of women to Canadian public life were constantly evolving.