



Youth and the Right to Vote

Case Study

✘ Background information

For much of Canada's history, 21 was the "age of majority," when a person was considered mature enough to participate in the democratic process and vote in elections. However, this presented a distinct contradiction, as people under 21 could be called to serve in the military, work and pay taxes, and get married and have children of their own.

In 1867, the minimum voting age was 21. This remained the case, with a couple of exceptions during the two world wars, until 1970, when the voting age was lowered to 18. Throughout these 100-plus years, debates and discussions took place in Parliament and in living rooms across Canada about lowering the voting age. A major change took place when people under 21 were recruited to fight for Canada during the First and Second World Wars. Their service was recognized, and during these conflicts all military personnel were offered the vote, no matter their age. When the wars ended, the privileges that had been granted to them as soldiers disappeared, and the minimum voting age went back to 21.

Starting in the 1940s, things began to change; Saskatchewan offered the vote to 18 year-olds in 1944. Other provinces followed suit, lowering their voting ages to 18 and 19. However, the federal voting age continued to be set at 21 well into the late 1960s, when Canada and much of the world experienced something of a youth revolution. Young Canadians were becoming more socially and politically aware and radicalized. They wanted to be involved, and they pushed for ways to participate in deciding their own democratic present and future. Parliamentarians heard their arguments and debated lowering the voting age. A series of bills proposing legislation were introduced in 1969, and the voting age was eventually lowered to 18 in 1970.

Why was the voting age not lowered from 21 sooner?

- **Maturity**

Many thought that young people were not prepared to participate in the democratic process, as they were seen as lacking sufficient knowledge and life experience to make good choices.

- **Responsibility**

Voting was viewed as a serious responsibility and privilege that individuals could exercise only once they were old enough.

What changed?

- Military service by those under age 21 in both the First and Second World War was a positive factor demonstrating maturity, courage and loyalty.
- Youth became an increasingly significant group. The population of young people grew significantly after the Second World War, and more and more young Canadians entered the workforce.
- In the 1960s, Canadian youth organized and sought to engage in the democratic process and have a voice in how they were governed.
- Change was happening not only in Canada but around the world, as other countries also recognized that youth were ready to participate and so lowered their voting age.