



A Brief History of Federal Voting Rights in Canada

✘ Background information

The Voting Rights through Time activity uses brief case studies of specific groups to show that not everyone has always had the right to vote. However, these examples do not tell the whole story. The following is a summary of some key milestones in voting rights at the federal level. Note that voting history is complex, and this chart does not cover everything.

Evolution of Federal Voting Rights

1867

British North America Act

When Canada is formed, only men who are British subjects 21 years of age or older, and who own property are able to vote in federal elections. People who are excluded from voting provincially cannot vote federally.

1876

Indian Act

First Nations peoples' lives are governed by the *Indian Act*. It grants First Nations peoples the right to vote, but only if they give up their Indian status. They can vote because the law no longer considers them "Indians."

1917

Wartime Elections Act and Military Voters Act

During the First World War, all male and female members of the armed forces and female relatives of soldiers are offered the right to vote. This is the first time that some women, some men under the age of 21, and some First Nations peoples can vote in a Canadian federal election.

1918

Many women can vote federally

Canadian women now have the right to vote in federal elections if they meet the same eligibility criteria as men. First Nations women who meet these criteria can vote only if they give up their Indian status.

1920

Dominion Elections Act

A new elections law brings in major changes, such as the appointment of a Chief Electoral Officer, but does not provide consistent voting rights across Canada. Those disqualified from voting in their home province because of their race are ineligible to vote in federal elections. (For example, since British Columbia excludes Asian Canadians from voting provincially, they cannot vote federally. However, Asian Canadians living elsewhere do have the federal vote.) Across Canada, First Nations people living on reserves are not eligible to vote.

1934

Inuit are disqualified

Legislation specifically excludes Inuit from voting in federal elections.

1948

All Asian Canadians gain the vote

The federal vote is now open to Canadians regardless of provincial exclusions. (Japanese, Chinese and other Asian Canadians can vote federally, no matter which province they live in.)

1950

Inuit are able to vote

Inuit obtain the right to vote in Canadian federal elections.

1960

First Nations women and men can vote

First Nations women and men are able to vote no matter where they live and without giving up their Indian status.

1982

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* affirms the right of every Canadian citizen to vote and to stand as a candidate.

Facts of Interest

- **Confederation**

In 1867, voting is considered a privilege. Only select people could vote: men aged 21 or older who were British subjects by birth or naturalized citizens and who owned certain property or paid rent and had income. These rules excluded a large portion of the population of Canada from voting. Only about half the adult male population could vote.

- **Property ownership**

For many decades after 1867 and until 1920, a property-based qualification required voters either to own property to a certain value or to pay rent or to make a certain annual income.

- **Voters lists**

Voters lists indicate who may vote in an election. From 1867 to 1917, the responsibility for drawing up these lists shifted back and forth between the provinces and the federal government. This had the effect of disqualifying people in certain provinces.

- **First Nations**

First Nations men could vote from 1869 onward only if they gave up their Indian status. During the First and Second World Wars, First Nations men and women who served in the military were given the right to vote. First Nations women and men got the vote unconditionally in 1960.

- **Métis**

Voting restrictions were not formally imposed on Métis men who were allowed to vote if they met the age, citizenship and property ownership conditions. A Métis man was elected to Parliament in 1871. Métis women got the vote in 1918 along with most Canadian women.

- **Inuit**

Inuit were not mentioned in federal election law until 1934, when they were explicitly excluded from voting. They gained the right to vote in 1950.

- **Religion**

Religion was not normally a factor in voting eligibility after 1867, but during wartime, Mennonites, Doukhobors and Hutterites, among others, were restricted from voting because they opposed military service. Conscientious objectors were deprived of their voting rights in 1917 and again from 1938 to 1955.

- **Wartime**

During the First World War, some Canadians were denied the vote if they were born in an enemy nation or if their primary language was that of an enemy country. They got back the right to vote in 1922.

- **Persons of colour**

There was no formal rule prohibiting Canadians of colour from voting. They could vote if they met the gender, age, citizenship and property ownership conditions.

- **Occupation**

Certain occupations (government workers, judges and election officials) were excluded from voting for many years, with federally appointed judges first voting in 1988. Today, only the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada is unable to vote.

- **Mental disability**

From 1898 to 1993, many citizens with an intellectual disability were disqualified from voting in federal elections.

- **Prisoners**

Prison inmates were disqualified from voting from 1898 until 2004, when all prisoners got the right to vote, no matter the length of their sentence.

- **Residence**

Until 1993, Canadians living abroad were not allowed to vote, unless they were serving in the military or in the federal civil service.